

# Collaborative Painting by Chinese and Western Artists at the Qing Court: Evidence from the Huoji dang

Xinrui Fu\*

East China Normal University, Shanghai 200241, China

**Abstract:** As the principal art-production unit under the Workshops of the Imperial Household Department, the Qing dynasty Ruyi guan operated through highly rationalized and institutionalized procedures. Within this system, collaborative paintings, in which several artists divided the work on a single surface, were not merely an efficient mode of collective production. They were also political acts governed by strict bureaucratic control. Drawing on the Huoji dang, the administrative records of the imperial workshops, this article examines collaborative painting as a distinctive form of court art production. It argues that Qing emperors, especially the Qianlong emperor, used standardized procedures of assignment, draft review, approval, revision, and completion to select and integrate the skills of Chinese court painters and European missionary artists.

**Keywords:** Ruyi guan, collaborative painting, imperial control, Huoji dang.

## 1. Introduction

In traditional Chinese art history, painting is often treated as a private act through which scholar-artists voiced inner sentiments and asserted an individual spirit. When attention shifts to art made within the Qing court, however, this romantic narrative of individual creation gives way to a factory-like system governed by administrative discipline. The Ruyi guan, an art-production unit under the Workshops of the Imperial Household Department, was the most developed expression of this system.

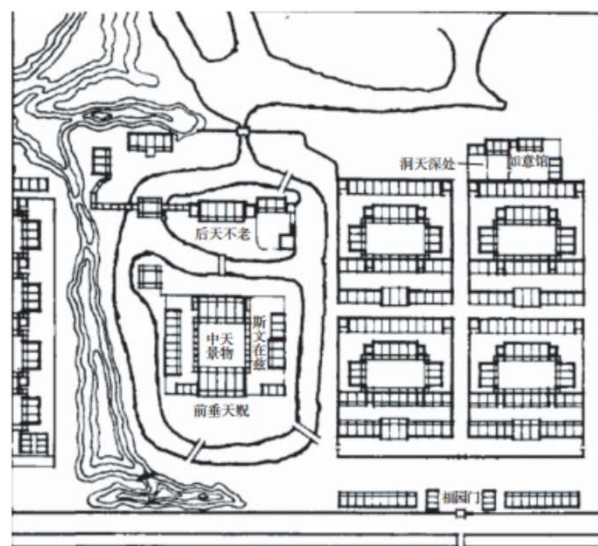
The daily operations of the Ruyi guan generated numerous works that may be described as collaborative paintings. In this mode of production, two or more court painters, acting on an imperial order, worked on the same piece of silk, paper, or architectural panel. Different artists were assigned figures, landscapes, birds and flowers, architectural ruled-line painting, or other components, which were then joined into a finished work. By examining relevant entries in the *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang*, hereafter the *Huojì dang*, this article investigates paintings jointly executed by Chinese and Western artists at the Qing court.

## 2. Institutional Origins

### 2.1. Evolution of the Court Painting Institution

The Qing court painting institution was not a direct continuation of the academies of the Song and Ming dynasties. Under the Shunzhi and Kangxi emperors, court painting was organized mainly through the Painting Workshop within the Workshops of the Imperial Household Department. During the Yongzheng reign, a Painting Office was established under the Painting Workshop, but its staff remained dispersed among the Yuanmingyuan, Xian'an Palace, Cining Palace, and other sites rather than being centrally administered. The name Ruyi guan first appears in records from 1736, the first year of the Qianlong reign. The "Biographies of Artists" in the *Draft History of Qing* states that court painters held no official rank and that the Ruyi guan, located south of Qixiang Palace, housed painters, literary attendants, jade carvers, and mounting specialists [1]. The institution produced paintings, mounted works, jade carvings, and ivory carvings, although

painting remained its principal activity. It was situated northeast of Dongtian Shenchu, one of the twenty scenic sites east of the main gate of the Yuanmingyuan (Figure 1) [2].



**Figure 1.** Location of Dongtian Shenchu and the Ruyi guan in the Yuanmingyuan during the Qianlong reign. Source: Dongtian Shenchu, Yuanmingyuan, no. 2 (1983), p. 155.

The Ruyi guan was not a purely artistic institution. It was a comprehensive workshop encompassing painting, mounting, jade carving, ivory carving, enameling, and other crafts. Painting remained subordinate to practical imperial needs, including palace decoration, the recording of events, and the celebration of dynastic achievements. This institutional character indicates that collaborative painting arose first from production requirements rather than from an independent aesthetic program. When a work was exceptionally large or many works had to be completed within a deadline, a single painter could not finish the commission alone, making collaboration a practical necessity.

### 2.2. Administrative Classification of Painters

In the *Huojì dang*, painters and other artisans recruited from the south were initially grouped under the broad label

“southern artisans.” An entry from the eleventh month of 1727, the fifth year of the Yongzheng reign, mentions the “southern jade artisan Chen Tingxiu.” The term thus encompassed jade workers, enamellers, ivory carvers, and other specialists and was not specific to painters. In the first month of 1729, however, the records describe He Jinkun as a “painting person.” In the seventh month of 1744, the Qianlong emperor issued an explicit order: “Hereafter, do not write ‘southern artisan’; write ‘painting person’ in every case” [3].

This change in terminology was not incidental. It elevated painters above ordinary artisans by granting them a partially artistic status, yet it also defined their service to the throne with greater precision. A “painting person” was one who painted for the emperor and whose position depended on the sovereign.

This politics of naming was essential to collaborative painting. Only by placing Chinese and Western painters alike within the undifferentiated service category of “painting persons” could the institution suppress major differences in cultural background and pictorial tradition and subject all participants to the same imperial commands. Whether Giuseppe Castiglione or Tang Dai, painters were designated in the records as “painting persons” or baitangga, a Manchu term for an attendant. Their assignments were determined entirely by imperial orders transmitted through palace eunuchs.

### 3. Directives and Division of Labor

#### 3.1. Format of the Directives

Entries concerning collaborative paintings in the Huoji dang follow a highly standardized format. A typical record reads:

*“Assistant foreman Fobao and others submitted a written order escorted by Storekeeper Lang Zhengpei and others. It recorded: on the ninth day of the fifth month of the thirteenth year, the eunuch Hu Shijie delivered a handscroll of One Hundred Horses. The imperial order stated: Giuseppe Castiglione is to paint a handscroll of one hundred horses on xuan paper; Zhou Kun is to paint the trees and rocks; Ding Guanpeng is to paint the figures” [4].*

The discourse of such orders contains five recurring elements: the date, the person transmitting the command, usually a eunuch, the object concerned, the specific division of labor expressed as “X is ordered to paint Y,” and a closing formula acknowledging the imperial command.

Most important is the repeated verb zhu, “to order.” Phrases such as “Castiglione is ordered to paint” and “Zhou Kun is ordered to paint” carry the force of a command in Qing imperial usage, not of negotiation or advice. Each division of labor in a collaborative painting was therefore a direct enactment of imperial will rather than a voluntary partnership among artists.

#### 3.2. Types of Collaborative Division

A systematic review of more than eighty collaborative-painting directives from the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns suggests three principal patterns of labor division.

Type A was remedial collaboration and appears only in the Yongzheng reign. In one example from 1729, an earlier horizontal scroll titled Yutang Fugui had been judged unsatisfactory. The emperor ordered Castiglione to repaint the flowers and Tang Dai to repaint the rocks. Such collaboration functioned as revision: the original painting had been rejected,

and the two artists effectively produced a new work.

Type B was binary collaboration, the most common arrangement. One artist painted the principal subject, such as a horse, eagle, or face, while another painted the setting of trees, rocks, or flowers. A representative order for White Eagle in the twenty-second year of the Qianlong reign assigned Castiglione the white eagle and Yao Wenhan the perch, curtain, and brocade covering [5]. This is the clearest form of collaborative painting, with subject and background sharply divided (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Giuseppe Castiglione, White Eagle, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 176.6 × 95 cm.

Type C was multilateral collaboration. Three or more artists participated, and their assignments were more finely differentiated. An order dated the fifteenth day of the tenth month of 1751 stated: “On the eastern and western sides of the Jiuzhou Qingyan Xianlou, Giuseppe Castiglione and Ding Guanpeng are to prepare drafts for two continuous scenes ... Ding Guanpeng is approved to paint the figures; Yao Wenhan is to paint the flowers; Yu Sheng is to paint the mountains and rocks; Zhang Zongcang is to paint the ruled architecture; Zhang Gao is to paint the flower stands and partition doors; Wang Youxue and others are to paint.”

At least seven artists were involved: Castiglione, Ding Guanpeng, Yao Wenhan, Yu Sheng, Zhang Zongcang, Zhang Gao, and Wang Youxue. They separately handled the drafts, figures, flowers, mountains and rocks, architectural elements,

flower stands, and continuous-scene passages. Multilateral collaboration was most often used for large panoramic paintings and demonstrates the high degree of specialization achieved at the Ruyi guan.

## 4. Workflow of Collaborative Painting

Within the Ruyi guan, the production of a collaborative painting followed a tightly controlled bureaucratic sequence. It can be divided into six stages: transmission of the imperial order, assignment of tasks, preparation of a draft, presentation for imperial inspection, approval of a model, revision, and final execution.

### 4.1. Imperial Orders and Task Assignment

Every Qing court collaborative painting began with an imperial command. The Huoji dang records such orders in considerable detail. The emperor determined not only the subject but also the artist responsible for each pictorial component. One entry for the twenty-sixth year of the Qianlong reign states: “Order Giuseppe Castiglione to paint the peacock, Jin Tingbiao to paint the flowers, and Fang Cong to paint the landscape background” [6].

Within this system, the emperor was both the supreme patron and final consumer and effectively served as the designer of the work. The painters of the Ruyi guan functioned as technical specialists charged with realizing his intentions.

### 4.2. Drafting and Imperial Review

After receiving an imperial order, painters could not begin directly on costly silk or xuan paper. They first had to prepare a small design or working draft on inexpensive paper. Officials of the Imperial Household Department then submitted the draft for imperial inspection. The emperor’s review could extend to the placement of figures, the colors of garments, and even the density of an individual tree.

*An entry from the fifth month of the twentieth year of the Qianlong reign records: “On the thirteenth day, Assistant Director Lang Zhengpei reported that the eunuch Hu Shijie had delivered a hanging scroll painted by the emperor himself. The imperial order stated: have Yu Sheng apply washes and color to it. Respect this. The washes and color were completed and the work delivered on the same day.”*

If the emperor was dissatisfied, the draft had to be revised repeatedly. Only after receiving a vermilion annotation approving the model would the Workshops issue costly materials such as finished silk, paper, or gold-flecked ground. Administratively, this draft system ensured precision when large works were assembled and mounted. It also filtered out visual elements that conflicted with court protocol before final execution began.

## 5. “Chinese Essence, Western Technique”

### 5.1. Selective Adoption of Pictorial Techniques

The high Qing court adopted Western pictorial techniques selectively. The Huoji dang and missionary correspondence together suggest two broad groups of techniques, those accepted and those rejected (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Techniques accepted and rejected at the Qing court

| Accepted techniques                              | Rejected techniques                  |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Single-point perspective (linear perspective)    | Side shadows on the face             |
| Anatomical accuracy                              | Highlights or “glare”                |
| Fine engraved lines                              | Heavy oil-paint texture              |
| Chiaroscuro, restricted to landscape backgrounds | Strong complementary-color contrasts |

This selectivity did not result from ignorance of Western art. The Kangxi emperor studied mathematics, astronomy, and geography systematically with missionaries. The French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet described him as naturally interested in everything useful and as deeply engaged with Western science as well as Chinese learning [7]. Although the Qianlong emperor was less technically accomplished than Kangxi, his long exposure to European objects gave him an informed basis for aesthetic judgment. Both rulers extracted Western techniques for functional use while retaining Chinese painting as the normative framework.

Within court taste, the central values of Chinese painting may be summarized as the priority of expressive line over modeled surfaces, the suggestiveness of empty space over fully filled representation, and a clean effect under frontal illumination over dramatic chiaroscuro. Single-point perspective could heighten spatial verisimilitude without compromising the clarity of line. Anatomical accuracy could make horses and dogs more lifelike without destroying their contours. Both were selectively accepted. Shadows cast across a face, by contrast, could produce a divided “yin-yang face” incompatible with the ritual requirement of even frontal light in imperial portraiture. Highlights could appear soiled on silk, and the heavy material texture of oil paint conflicted with the brush-and-ink values of Chinese painting. These effects were therefore rejected.

### 5.2. Removal of Shadow as a Core Task

A brief entry dated the eleventh day of the third month of 1745 is especially revealing: “Order Lang Shining to remove the glare from the painting.” Here, “glare” denotes highlights and excessively strong contrasts of light and dark. The instruction shows that even in a work completed by Castiglione alone, the emperor could demand the removal of the most recognizable effects of Western modeling. Collaborative production implemented this demand more thoroughly. Castiglione might paint a face but remove its glare, while Chinese painters completed the drapery and background with flat color and linear drawing. The finished image retained accurate proportion and a degree of volume while minimizing conspicuous traces of Western technique.

This evidence supports a revision to a familiar interpretation. Scholarship may have overstated the influence of Western painting on Qing court art. A more precise formulation is that the Qing court appropriated Western painting selectively and instrumentally in the service of its own aesthetic system. Perspective and naturalism were accepted only when they did not challenge the basic norms of Chinese painting. Collaborative painting was the institutional vehicle for this controlled appropriation.

## 6. Imperial Control and the Construction of a Visual Order

The Qing emperor's strict control of collaborative painting at the Ruyi guan served a deeper purpose. By diminishing individual artistic styles, the institution constructed a political visual order suited to the needs of a unified empire.

### 6.1. Dissolution of Individual Brushwork

From the Ming and Qing periods onward, Jiangnan literati painters emphasized individual brushwork. From an imperial perspective, however, a strongly marked personal style could signify instability. When several painters worked on the same surface, constrained one another, and joined their brushwork, artistic subjectivity was divided into functional components.

Because no single artist was independently responsible for the whole work, personal signatures were tightly controlled. On completion, several painters often signed jointly in an unobtrusive corner and used the mandatory formula "Your servant, so-and-so, respectfully painted this." The institutionalization of this "servant signature" absorbed individual identity into the collective achievement of the court workshop and placed artistic production under imperial ownership.

### 6.2. Construction of Images of Dynastic Prosperity

As a vast multiethnic and transregional empire, the Qing used painting to display the legitimacy of its rule. Collaborative works from the Ruyi guan were well suited to this politics of images.

In collaborative paintings of court leisure, banquets, hunts, and historical events, the visual order was carefully constructed. European missionaries used highly developed naturalistic techniques to render convincing likenesses of the emperor and civil and military officials, lending credibility to the represented event. Chinese court painters used ruled-line architectural techniques to depict imposing palaces, implying a well-ordered society. Landscape specialists represented the empire's mountains and rivers in traditional blue-and-green or light-ochre modes.

By combining Western scientific naturalism, the orthodox tradition of Chinese literati painting, and the court system of ruled-line architecture, such works visually symbolized the orderly coexistence of multiple cultures within a unified empire. They thereby constructed a persuasive image of dynastic prosperity.

### 6.3. Direct Imperial Intervention

Numerous entries in the Huoji dang show that the Qianlong emperor's intervention went far beyond selecting painters and extended to specific pictorial decisions. His 1776 instructions for Ignatius Sichelbarth's Fengxing tu are representative. He specified the dimensions of a sleeping tiger, ordering it enlarged by five cun in height and two cun in width. He assigned the parasol tree to Yang Dazhang and requested more flowers in the foreground. He assigned the black ape, wildcat, emu, trees, and rocks to Fang Cong, while retaining Yang

Dazhang for the ground and flowers. The choice of artist, subject matter, and dimensions for each component was dictated orally by the emperor, recorded in writing by eunuchs, and then executed.

This intervention indicates that the ultimate "author" of a Sino-Western collaborative painting was neither Castiglione nor any Chinese painter, but the Qianlong emperor. The division of labor between Western and Chinese painters distributed the emperor's artistic will among different technical executants. This helps explain the high degree of stylistic coordination in collaborative works: the standard of coherence arose not from negotiation among painters but from a unified imperial judgment.

## 7. Conclusion

Collaborative painting under the Ruyi guan extended the Qing court bureaucracy into the field of artistic production. It was not a spontaneous experiment by painters but an institutional product of technical complementarity, production efficiency, and imperial control.

Through standardized administrative procedures, the emperor intervened precisely in pictorial content, style, and production schedules. Chinese and Western painters worked together in a centralized studio, and their individual artistic tendencies were subordinated to institutional norms and technical compromise. This system recombined Western perspective with traditional Chinese brushwork and directed the result toward a political narrative of prosperity in a unified multiethnic empire. In doing so, it established the distinctive historical and visual position of Qing court painting.

## References

- [1] Zhao, E., et al. (1990). *Qing shigao jiaozhu [Annotated draft history of Qing]* (Vol. 15). Academia Historica. (Original work published n.d.), p. 11561.
- [2] Shan, G. (2004). *Zhongguo meishu: Ming Qing zhi jindai [Chinese art from the Ming and Qing to the modern period]*. Renmin University of China Press, p. 59.
- [3] *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang: Qianlong 9 (1), Jishilu [Archives of the imperial workshops: Qianlong Year 9, vol. 1, Record of events]*. (2003). In *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang* (Facsimile ed.). National Palace Museum, p. 234.
- [4] *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang: Qianlong 13 (6), Ruyi guan [Archives of the imperial workshops: Qianlong Year 13, vol. 6, Ruyi guan]*. (2003). In *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang* (Facsimile ed.). National Palace Museum, p. 610.
- [5] *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang: Qianlong 22 (2), Ruyi guan [Archives of the imperial workshops: Qianlong Year 22, vol. 2, Ruyi guan]*. (2003). In *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang* (Facsimile ed.). National Palace Museum, p. 506.
- [6] *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang: Qianlong 39 (1), Ruyi guan [Archives of the imperial workshops: Qianlong Year 39, vol. 1, Ruyi guan]*. (2003). In *Ge zuo chengzuo huoji qingdang* (Facsimile ed.). National Palace Museum, p. 4.
- [7] Bouvet, J. (2008). *Xifangren yanzhong de Kangxi dadi [The Kangxi emperor through western eyes]*. In *Kangxi dadi*. People's Daily Press, p. 27.