

# Female Figures in Chinese Qing Dynasty Armor Art

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## Abstract

In ancient China, traditional costumes have an important function of marking the identity of the noble and commoner status hierarchy. Before modern times, the shape, fabric, and color of folk women's clothing were not clearly defined, but they were subject to folklore and had many taboos. The wives of ministers or members of royalty were expected to comport themselves according to their husbands' official status and were forbidden from breaking any restrictions. But in the visual archives of the last feudal dynasty of ancient China, we have astonishing discoveries about the new image of Chinese women in the Qing Dynasty — Artworks of Qing Dynasty women in armor, their historical background, and artistic qualities bring us a lot of unprecedented inspiration and reflection. Based on the textual research on the hierarchical system of armor in the Qing Dynasty, combined with the background of national culture, this paper analyzes that the appearance of the image of female armor in the Qing Dynasty is a politicized performance of the ruling class, and its essence is still the projection of the aesthetic interest of feudal patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Qing dynasty, female figure, armor art

## 1. Introduction

The history of armor art is part of military history with men as the main protagonists, but on the margins of or outside gigantic history, there are many females speaking a miniature and neglected history. "Women" and "Armor" these keywords that appeared combined in artwork from the Qing Dynasty 200 years ago and are highly innovative. A confident and radiant woman wearing a Western-style plate armor and holding a saber is shown in a Qing Dynasty painting in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. With its vibrant colors, fluid brushstrokes, and copious amounts of detail, this precious oil painting brilliantly and realistically depicts a confident demeanor lady who wears metallic armor. In this artwork, the historical moment of the Qing Dynasty court's acceptance of European-style armor is depicted. (Figure 1) The author of this painting is Giuseppe Castiglione from Italy, who visited China in 1715 as a missionary and then became a court painter in the Qing Dynasty. Although the identity of the lady in the artwork is uncertain, she must be quite honourable. In some historical research is assumed her to be the Qianlong Emperor's concubine Rong. The *Draft History of Qing* (清史稿) (Zhao, 1985) records that Princess Rong was the only concubine of the Qianlong emperor from the Uyghur tribe, adept at riding and archery, and often accompanied him on his hunting trips; Another hypothesis holds that was the youngest daughter of the Qianlong emperor, Princess He Xiao. In any case, we are concerned that the armored figures of Chinese women from the Qing Dynasty have generally been ignored or marginalized, and it is this unidentifiable art painting from over 200 years ago that reminds us that they truly existed.



Figure 1. Oil portrait of woman in armor. The Qing Dynasty Image is used from [www.npm.gov.tw](http://www.npm.gov.tw) National Palace Museum. Taipei

## 2. Hierarchy and Power—A Multi-faceted Approach to Understanding Qing Dynasty Armor

The imperial will predominated everywhere under the highly centralized Chinese feudal regimes. The costume acted as a crucial symbol of hierarchy and prestige as well as class status. Consolidating governmental authority and preserving social order were the primary functions. Apparently, in the armor hierarchy, Women are excluded.

Chinese armor has a very long history, developing from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (about 1600 BC-256 BC) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911); Being the particular icons of Chinese culture, Chinese heritage has accompanied both the functional and artistic development of armor. However, as firearms advanced, the era of cold weapons faded, and armor became ceremonial attire during a lengthy period of peace in Qing Dynasty history, nobility and high-ranking officials were required to wear armor for military parades or grand ceremonial occasions.

A photo titled "Women in Qing Dynasty Armor" from Thomas Child's photo collection caught our attention (Figure 2). We tried to find records of women wearing armor before the Qing Dynasty, and I found that it was not the first time in ancient Chinese history that women were recorded wearing armor. By reviewing the historical book *Nan Qi Shu - Wei Ru Zhuan*, (南齊書 魏虜傳) we learned that the earliest record of the image of female armor in ancient China could be found in the Northern Dynasty period (386-581): "When the Empress Dowager traveled, women wore armored armor and rode on both sides of the sedan chair." (Zhou, 1984)「太後出，則婦女著鎧騎馬，近輦左右」The History of Ming also recorded that the emperor's favorite concubine Wan Guifei wore armor during the Chenghua period of the Ming Dynasty (1465-1487): "The emperor every parade, Wan Guifei wears armor accompanied by horseback riding."「帝每遊幸，妃戎服前驅。」(Wang, Wan, & Zhang, 1959) But these were only recorded in historical literature, the visual image of female armor in China's feudal dynasties would have begun in the Qing Dynasty.



Figure 2. Women in Qing Dynasty Armor

Image is used from Thomas Childs Historical Images of China - A Collection of Early Photographers (2017)

Armors of the Qing dynasty are nothing short of extraordinary. Since armor was no longer used in battle in the late Qing dynasty, armor became a symbol of the violent organs of the state. However, armor is not only a work of costume art or a weapon. Neither is conducive to an understanding of the connotations of armor. Qing Dynasty armor categories are abundant, the main form was the cloth armor. Still, the fabrics and decorative materials used in the armor of different statuses were different, representing different status levels. The armor system of the Qing Dynasty did not allow to overstep the rules, otherwise, he would be executed for the crime of conspiracy against the government. The rules for helmets and armor for various grades were fairly specific in *Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian* (Kungang, 1976) (欽定大清會典). In "Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian," there are not only stringent guidelines for the style and material of helmets worn by various status levels of imperial relatives and officials, but there are also incredibly thorough records on how armor used, appended for each level of helmet and armor (Figures 3, 4), which are extremely helpful for us to visualize the intricate armor of the Qing Dynasty.

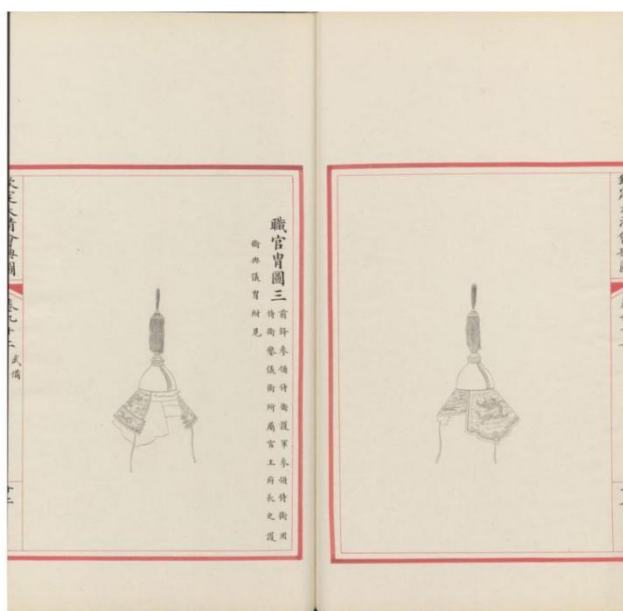


Figure 3. Helmet illustrations from Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian Tu

Image is used from www.shuge.org Chapter 11 Volume 91: Military Equipment I (Armor I)

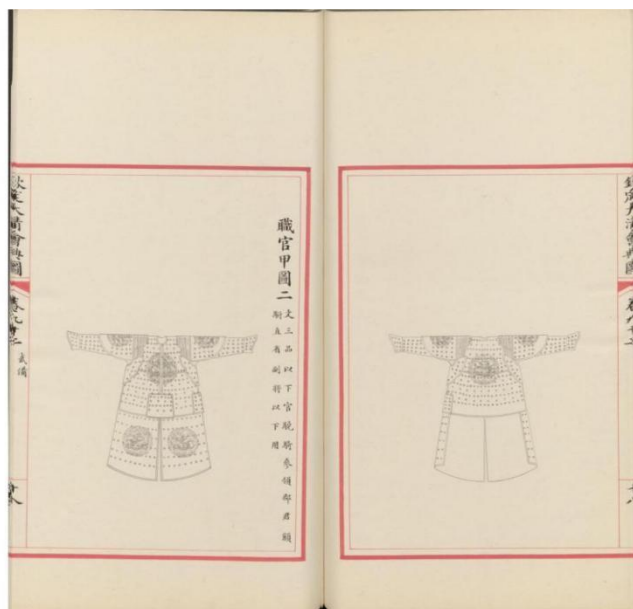


Figure 4. Armor illustrations from *Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian Tu*  
Image is used from [www.shuge.org](http://www.shuge.org) Chapter 11 Volume 91: Military Equipment I (Armor II)

The rigorous and detailed historical information on helmet and armor ranks recorded in these official ancient documents from the Qing Dynasty facilitates our identification of the woman in this old photograph, while the details of the decoration on the helmet of the female general in the black and white photo are not visible, we can see that it is a very sophisticated and exquisite design. The female general's armor obviously has a dark edging, in her chest hanging heart guard mirror, in the shoulders, there are metal armor pieces, and the armor is covered with metal nails, there are five python patterns on both shoulders, chest and legs (according to the picture in the *Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian Tu* (欽定大清會典圖) there is another python pattern on the back). Comparing these features with the requirements of the helmets and armors of the officials and nobles of each rank in the "Qin Ding Da Qing Hui Dian," it can be identified that the woman in the photo wearing the armor with the six pythons should be a third-rank official. The female general is different from other male generals with beards in this photo, she has a clear complexion but a solemn expression.

In the official history books of the Qing Dynasty, we did not find any records of female generals, but in the late Qing Dynasty, the folk history book *Qing Dai Ye Ji* (清代野記) recorded the anecdote of a female general surnamed Chen under the famous Qing Dynasty General Zuo Zongtang: "About the background of General Chen should be the early years of the Tongzhi, General Duo Longa from Hunan Province into Shaanxi Province, after leaving Jingzi Pass, the army recruited soldiers, a young man came to enlist, his dark skin with many pimples, muscular physique, great strength, no one suspected his gender at the time, just entered the military camp on the battlefield, and was soon promoted to Batulu." Batulu is the translation of the Manchu language. The meaning of hero is the Qing dynasty period rewarded the war heroes with the title. The record of this female general is vague. Still, in any case, this old photo and the historical story about the female general bring us more imagination about the heroine of that era.

### 3. A Paradoxical Era of Multi-ethnic Cultural Integration

Why have we never seen any portraits of ancient Chinese women in armor before the Qing Dynasty? First things first, in this section, we need to halt and concentrate on the circumstances in which Chinese women lived during that time. The Qing Dynasty was the last feudal dynasty established by the Jurchen (Manchu) from the northeast of China. As an ethnic minority living in the harsh northern environment for a long time, the Manchus were good at equitation and archery, so the function of Qing Dynasty armor attached importance to equitation and archery. With the group known as "other ethnic group" into the Forbidden City, the first dilemma is that the rulers of the Qing Dynasty need to build a Manchu cultural system on the roots of the strong Han culture. The early Qing rulers actively promoted Manchu culture since they occupied the central plains of China.

Costume hierarchy as the embodiment of centralized power, the Qing government made strict laws requiring Han Chinese to wear Manchu costumes, changed to Manchu hairstyles, and prohibited the custom of foot-binding for Han Chinese women, but the implementation of this law evolved along with the resistance of

the Han Chinese people and the progress of the times. Our exploration of the aesthetics of the Qing Dynasty inevitably leads to an insight into the foot-binding trend of the time. A morbid aesthetic culture was popular among Han Chinese women in the Ming Dynasty before the Qing Dynasty, Women's foot-binding trend in the Qing Dynasty reached its peak. "Three Inch Golden Lotus" became the stereotype of upper-class women. After the nomadic Manchu conquered the Ming regime, issuing regulations prohibiting Han Chinese women from foot-binding, The Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang Oracle "foot-binding women into the Forbidden City shall be executed," 「有以纏足女子入宮者斬」 so Manchu women were not foot-binding, but the culture of foot-binding in the Han Chinese women's group was deeply rooted.



Figure 5. Lotus shoe, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), c. 1860s. Blue and red sateen, gilt trim 13.8 × 11.4 × 4.3 cm (5 1/2 × 4 1/2 × 1 3/4 in.) Image is used from [www.artic.edu](http://www.artic.edu) Art Institute of Chicago. U.S

Figure 2 demonstrates that the female general in this photograph did not suffer from foot-binding. Her identity is likely to be a Manchu woman, a high-status Manchu woman. In contrast, the Manchu group having never been influenced by Confucian culture is more receptive to women, at least the armored image of women has never been displayed visually in the thousands of years of Han culture. The emergence of this landscape is related to the multiple cultural order of the game in the early Qing Dynasty. In the early Qing Dynasty, the Cheng-Chu school (程朱理學) originating from the Song Dynasty had an important position, in its later stages of development the "Zhu Zi school", which overemphasized ethics and morality and the order of inferiority and superiority, was gradually rejected by the mainstream cultural circle. The moment in history women's wearing of male armor may be interpreted as a protest by the intercultural rulers against the decaying views contained in Cheng-Chu's philosophy.

Secondly, we can observe in the *Draft History of Qing-Yu Fu Zhi* (清史稿-輿服誌) that the Qing Dynasty, as a minority regime, always had an ineffable cultural complex. On the one hand, they wished to stick to their own cultural identity and were unwilling to follow Han culture easily. On the other hand, they believed that Han culture had much to contribute and was vital for regime stabilization. (Hua, 2015) In fact, at every stage of dynastic development, the Qing emperors' diverse attitudes towards the Manchu-Chinese costume system reflect their different political visions and aesthetic sensibilities.

In the portraits of Qing dynasty emperors in the Palace Museum, the "Twelve Symbols" used for the coronation of Han emperors were never used by the Qing dynasty emperors before the Qianlong emperor, while the court robe and formal dress of the Qing dynasty emperors after the Qianlong emperor added the "Twelve Symbols" based on Qianlong style. Another famous painting of *The Qianlong Emperor and his concubines hunting deer* (乾隆帝及妃威弧獲鹿圖卷) in the Palace Museum, (Figure 6) this scroll as well as the oil portrait of the woman in armor in Fig. 1, was painted by a palace painter of the Qianlong era. The painting is a scene of the Qianlong Emperor riding a horse at the Mulan hunting grounds in autumn. The painting shows the Qianlong Emperor on a

galloping horse preparing to shoot the deer, with the young and beautiful imperial concubine riding close behind and handing over a feathered arrow at a critical moment. By identifying the hairstyle costume and facial features, the imperial concubine in the picture wearing traditional Qing Dynasty armor is considered to be Concubine Rong from Xinjiang. The two portraits of women in armor during the Qianlong period show us not only the Emperor's acceptance of Western armor but also his enlightened attitude toward women in military attire, The rulers of the mid-Qing dynasty were tolerant of Chinese studies, this change was due in part to the Qing Dynasty's admiration for "Harmony" culture during this period. "Assimilation" was a very crucial core of Qing culture.



Figure 6. *Scroll of Emperor Qianlong and His Concubine Winning a Deer* 乾隆帝及妃威弧獲鹿圖卷  
Image is used from [www.dpm.org.cn](http://www.dpm.org.cn) The Palace Museum, Beijing, China

Finally, many western scholars argue that almost all women in traditional China were illiterate in 19th century, in fact, upper-class women in the late Qing Dynasty would receive some sort of education, and even Manchu aristocratic families would hire Western teachers as tutors. (Holmgren, 1981) When The First Feminist Wave was underway in the West, the closed doors of China were opened. Ancient China was introduced to advanced science and technology, as well as Western ideas about women's status, education, and marital autonomy. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, the feminist movement in China was in its gestation stage, and the Western missionaries brought cameras as well as more advanced artistic and aesthetic concepts to China. The introduction of Western feminist thought to some extent, brought a new healthy and natural aesthetic approach to the women of the late Qing Dynasty, they began to realize that they might be able to choose a totally new lifestyle in their lives, even if it was still challenging at the moment, but this must be the first page of a new chapter. For the emergence of female armored figures, this is a crucial historical context.

#### 4. Aesthetic Significance in the Era of Female Armor Image in Morbid Aesthetics

If we use Hegel's philosophy of "What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable." (Xie, 2021) to think about the artistic significance of the image of women wearing armor in the late Qing Dynasty, which pursued a morbid aesthetic, this phenomenon must have been in line with this cultural trend of the times. But we still try to peek into some hidden corners of history to explore the traces of women in that era. Scholars have found in studies on the aesthetic trends of ancient Chinese women that in times of national strength, wealth and progress, it was usually popular to be fit and strong; in times of national weakness, the aesthetic of sickly thinness tended to be pursued. (Wu, 2004) The Qing women in armor were entirely different from the popular images of "weak", "silent" and "submissive" women of the time. They conveyed to the public that they were upper-class women with heroic "masculine" qualities. But the presentation of such qualities is set within a certain threshold and is modified. "Much about what we wish to see or not to see about the past, and arguably makes from us some of the past's most significant features." (Clunas, 2013)

Some scholars argue that the concept of Western female emancipation is based on the product of Western industrial societies and cannot be applied to women in Third World countries. In the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society of the late Qing Dynasty, the pursuit of freedom dress by the upper-class women of the Qing Dynasty was different from the feminist movements in the West during the same period. It's more of a small-scale, ambiguous, hesitant, tentative push into the realm of freedom, a vision projected into clothing choices. As a defensive weapon, armor became a symbolic artistic symbol of identity in the feudal regime after

the end of the Cold War period. It gradually became a prop for the emotional expression of women's pursuit of freedom.

Looking back at the Qing Dynasty 200 years ago, we realize that the aesthetic subservience of women's costumes dominated by the contemporary Chinese political climate seems to be well documented. Whether the portraits of women in armor in the paintings of Qing Dynasty painters, or the female generals in old photos, they are all within the limits by male authority set, (Bernhardt, 1999) in the hidden space, they have pursued some power beyond the hierarchy, which originally belonged to them. In ancient China and even in modern China, have a tacit tradition that an achieved great successfully woman in some fields can be crowned with a honourable title commonly used by men, by transferring this pattern of behavior to the portrayal of female armor in the Qing Dynasty, it is easy to understand why men gave women an image of identity that had long been tacitly male-dominated in the past. Based on these theoretical studies and analyses, the artistic images of women in armor during the Qing Dynasty can be regarded as a kind of "art installations of the male ruling class in a patriarchal society", which is still a reflection of the feudal authority and aesthetic interest under the influence of Confucianism.

## 5. Conclusion

"She's non-existent in the world, nothing more than a coat hanger." (Chang, 2003) Female armor figure aesthetics may well be the prologue of Chinese feminist theory understood more broadly. The portrayal of women in that era always reflected a complex and delicate relationship with the times background. Through multiple interpretations of the image of women's armor in the Qing Dynasty, the growth of feminism under the feudal hierarchy and Confucian culture was quite limited. We realized that all of this is more like a politicalized art performance of the ruling class, its emergence is directly correlated with the evolution of the political and cultural backdrop. Its core is patriarchal ideology's manipulation and reshaping of the image of women, and the voice of women in the Qing Dynasty was determined by those male intellectuals who had a considerable imagination for women's cognition, which was one of the biggest dilemmas for Chinese women at the time. (Zhang & Yang, 2021) There is no "authentic" female voice here, but what cannot be denied is that those women under the armor also brought some feminist enlightenment, which kicked off the feminist movement in the later Minguo period (1920-1949).

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