



***Artful Subversion:
Empress Dowager Cixi's Image Making
By Ying-chen Peng
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Artful Subversion: Empress Dowager Cixi's Image Making. By Ying-chen Peng. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023. ISBN 978-0-300-26343-5. ix+196 pp. \$50.



With a contentious and controversial reputation stretching back to the era of her regency at the end of the Qing Dynasty, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) was a savvy political figure with a strong interest in visual culture. In *Artful Subversion*, Ying-chen Peng analyzes the development and impact of Cixi's artistic patronage over time, providing a thorough view into the varied ways that Cixi utilized ceramics, painting, architecture, garden design, and portraiture to craft her persona both at court and in the international realm.

Organized into five chapters, *Artful Subversion's* greatest strength is in the innovative intermedial approach that Peng takes to her topic. The book's overall thesis is clear throughout: Cixi utilized art and visual culture for political purposes, subverting the dominant patriarchal, Confucian paradigms that ruled her world not through direct opposition, but by carefully crafting a vision of leadership through means of soft power methods which were met with little resistance. It is no small task to discuss such a wide variety of visual culture, but Peng adeptly switches between analyses of objects, spaces, artisans, and reception across diverse two- and three-dimensional media in a fashion that continually reinforces her primary message.

As Peng states in the Introduction, studying women is fraught with archival challenges no matter the culture, something which is particularly true for Qing imperial women. Moreover, Cixi's charged reputation adds additional layers of complexity to the project. *Artful Subversion* addresses this challenge with a clear explanation of methodology, incorporating a wide variety of material, archival, and secondary sources throughout, and maintaining a focus on court art patronage. Furthermore, Peng argues that empress dowagers had significant political influence owing to Chinese notions of filial piety, and she skillfully incorporates feminist perspectives in the book that allow for a reexamination of the non-textual records that Cixi produced.

Chapter One starts by investigating the iconography and symbolism of imperial portraits, including an evaluation of Cixi's fashion choices and their relationship with the textile industry, and the introduction of photographic portraits in the late nineteenth century. Of particular interest to royal studies readers is the integration of Cixi's image and Buddhist iconography, specifically that of Guanyin, as well as the "revolutionary" change of Qing imperial portraiture becoming publicly visible, which Peng argues Cixi saw as

“inevitable” in the face of contemporary European presentations of monarchy. Chapter Two is the shortest in the book, examining garden design and Cixi’s involvement in palace construction, as well as her use of feminine symbolism in these spaces, topics that are returned to in Chapter Four. Chapter Three is perhaps the most complex, detailing a specific commission of ceramic *Daya zhai* ware, and the gendered implications of a woman entering the masculine, regulated world of imperial porcelain production. Architecture returns as the subject of Chapter Four, specifically the Garden of Nurtured Harmony and the gendered nature of the space, design, and use of the structures. Chapter Five analyzes performative aspects of Cixi’s calligraphy and gifts, arguing against strict interpretations of authenticity, stating that things presented as from Cixi’s hand should be read as such, as they were intended to be a gift from her. This chapter also presents a strong feminist reading of Cixi’s painting practice and her utilization of woman instructors as an indication of her “respect for female talent” (129). The book concludes with an Epilogue examining Cixi’s mausoleum, the personal nature of which is unprecedented in Qing history.

Artful Subversion comes along at a time when the study of women in the visual culture of the late Qing and Republican periods is experiencing a flourish of activity. While many recent books and journal articles examine women artists, *Artful Subversion* takes a different approach in examining patronage and production. Yet, the sum of recent studies all show the rise in interest in women’s participation, influence, and impact in the visual arts, and all make the long overdue point that women were contributing in significant ways to the visual realm of late nineteenth and early twentieth century China. Additionally, *Artful Subversion* is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on both Cixi as a historical figure and her visual culture, contributing in meaningful ways to the burgeoning field of royal studies in East Asia. Peng’s wide range of materials and focus on patronage bring new perspectives to Cixi as a well-known but often misunderstood figure. Highlighting Cixi’s contributions in the visual realm of the court is where the book breaks new ground and builds upon both recent scholarship and recent exhibitions on the topic. These include the exhibition “Power/Play,” at the National Museum of Asian Art in 2011 which looked at Cixi’s portraits, “Empresses of China’s Forbidden City” in 2018 at the Peabody Essex Museum which examined Qing women, or “China’s Hidden Century” at the British Museum in 2023 that took a broader look at nineteenth century Qing visual culture.

While the book presents an impressive array of material, at times the sheer number of names, places, and historical actors felt difficult to keep up with. The index of names, including characters, is a helpful resource for the Chinese referents, but a more detailed

appendix listed by function would have been useful. For example, a listing of the different characters at court, the varied ceramics producers, and the multiplicity of portraitists; or a brief list of the structures of the imperial palace accompanied by their function would have been useful for the student reader. Additionally, Peng's points were well proven and impeccably researched, leaving readers with a strong understanding of the central thesis, yet this clarity was a double-edged sword; as the narrative arc felt a bit circular and repetitive at times.

For the past few decades, the field of art history has turned to the study of women artists and patrons in an attempt to address Linda Nochlin's question of "Why are there no great woman artists?" Historical social structures, a lack of adequate archival sources, a long bias towards male artists, and gendered issues at the Qing court have left us with an incomplete picture of Qing imperial court patronage. *Artful Subversion* skillfully works to overturn this historic bias, proving that Cixi and the visual culture she produced was not shallow or inconsequential, but rather exhibits a savvy means of navigating the patriarchal structures of the palace to gain power and influence at a time of immense cultural change.

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