

Chinese Baimiao Painting and European Drawing at the Qing Dynasty Court

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(left): Li Gonglin, “Five Horses,” ink on paper, Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo.

(right): Giuseppe Castiglione, “Dzungars Offering a Horse in Tribute,” 1748, ink on paper, Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris.

Within the scholarly circle of Chinese art history, the reemergence of Li Gonglin’s 李公麟 (1049–1106) “Five Horses” 五馬圖 at the “Masterpieces of Northern Song Painting and Calligraphy” exhibition held at the Nezu Museum, Tokyo, last year marked a significant event, as the celebrated work had eluded public attention for approximately eight decades. “Five Horses” by Li Gonglin stands as an exemplar of the literati painting movement from the late 11th century, an era noted for its rejection of mimetic representation and likeness in Chinese pictorial history in favor of spiritual resonance achieved through calligraphic brushwork, namely an emphasis on brush and ink. The literati cohort, comprising luminaries such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), and Li Gonglin, espoused an avant-garde renunciation of color for the development of the so-called *baimiao* 白描, “fine-line drawing” or an ink-monochrome style. This *baimiao* style, while interpreted differently across various eras, has been enshrined as the definitive hallmark of literati painting tradition.

Baimiao works, emblematic of literati identity, even garnered immense popularity in commercial workshops of the 17th century onward. Moreover, the Qing dynasty court in the 18th century also extensively employed the style in not only antiquarian works but also documentary

pieces and other genres, exemplified by “Dzungars Offering a Horse in Tribute 準噶爾貢馬圖” (Italian missionary Giuseppe Castiglione [1688–1766], 1748; held at the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris), “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers” 鹿角雙幅 (Qianlong Emperor [r. 1735–1796], 1762 and 1767; held at Metropolitan Museum of Art), “One or Two?” 是一是二圖 (Anonymous, c. 1745–1750; held at the Beijing Palace Museum), and “Up the River during Qingming” 清明上河圖 (Shen Yuan 沈源 [?–?], c. 18th century), to name a few. Interestingly, while ostensibly adopting Li’s *baimiao* style, these works, in fact, integrate Western shading techniques to impart a mimetic quality which the literati movement deliberately sought to eschew, thereby manifesting an inherently conflicting synthesis of European drawing and Chinese literati *baimiao*.

Considering that these works belong to different genres, past scholarship has focused on either the relationship between the works of the antiquarian themes with their classical prototypes or on the connection between the documentary type of works and their corresponding real-life events. Scholars have yet to analyze them as a whole from the context of the Chinese *baimiao* tradition nor have explored how *baimiao* works, originally considered the most conservative and core of the Chinese Han culture, could also enjoy a global dimension in the 18th-century Qing court. This research proposal aims to investigate this intriguing, yet seemingly conflicting, confluence of *baimiao* ink-monochrome paintings and European drawing methods, hoping to examine the mechanisms and rationales behind the amalgamation of these ostensibly divergent styles during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor as well as challenging the traditional hierarchies and genres of art within the Qing court’s cultural and aesthetic framework.

In practice, I would like to take two paintings as the starting point: “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers” and “Dzungars Offering a Horse in Tribute.” The two works are both executed in the ink-monochrome style. Remarkably, they are commonly deemed by present-day scholars as *baimiao* works in the tradition of Li Gonglin; however, evidence indicates that they were recognized as *Xifa* 西法, or Western style, within the contemporaneous court milieu.



Qianlong Emperor, “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers,” ink on paper, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Upon careful examination, one finds that “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers,” which curator Shi-ye Liu fascinatingly relates to the painting tradition of antlers in Europe, are constituted of ink-monochrome brush strokes with the ochre indicating shadowing, akin to some Renaissance drawings that employ red chalk as an auxiliary effect to the main body drawn in black. It is important to note that, given the imperial inscriptions and colophons, “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers” is undeniably an imperial formal work by any standard; in contrast, despite being established as an independent genre in 18th-century Europe, drawing remained lower within the artistic hierarchy, especially compared to oil painting, and was frequently viewed as preparatory works. If the Qianlong Emperor desired to appropriate a European style or media, why did he decide to choose this drawing style, rather than colored oil painting, to execute such a formal work?

Here “Dzungars Offering a Horse in Tribute” is critical. The painting superficially appears to be a traditional *baimiao* painting and some scholars even take it as a sketch or *gao* 稿, or manuscript copy. A close look, however, proves that it is highly finished, and given the colophons and poems written by the high court officials, it is by no means a sketch or preparatory drawing. Emperor Qianlong even clearly indicates it employed Western methods: “The relief shading technique in traditional painting originated from the Western Seas” 凹凸丹青法，流傳自海西. Official Peng Yuanrui 彭元瑞 (1731–1803) furthers the point in poetic prose by writing, “A technique that can depict concave and convex effects has been used in the image of the people from the far West” 凹凸圖留極西人. Finally, high official Dong Gao 董誥 (1740–1818) likewise states that “Western [painters] participated in making this painting” 作圖

兼有海西。It is thus clear that the Qianlong Emperor consciously chose a Western style for the portrayals of the people from the so-called “far West.”

But why a European drawing? Does the reminiscence of the drawing’s ink-monochromatic effect and its visible movements of lines akin to the *baimiao* style play a key factor? How much did Qianlong understand about European drawing tradition? Given Castiglione’s Italian background, on the other hand, how much did he know about the traditional literati *baimiao* style? What European drawing training or tradition was he equipped with? Did he try—or was he forced—to negotiate between his European training and the later learned Chinese literati esthetic? To address these complex questions, in addition to reconstructing and reexamining the *baimiao* tradition, we need to apprehend its counterpart, namely the development of European (especially Italian) drawing in the 18th century and its potential impact on Qing court art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a rich collection of significant *baimiao* paintings, not to mention holding “Two Paintings of Deer Antlers”—a treasure trove for this study. Most importantly, the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University has an exceptionally strong faculty group on Italian art, which would offer a rare opportunity for me to engage in an in-depth and comparative study of these artistic traditions. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary approach will not only shed light on the confluence of Chinese and Italian art within the imperial court, but also contribute to a broader understanding of contemporary cultural exchanges.

This research project is also in preparation for a bigger collaboration project, the “Colorless: A Global History of Monochromatic Drawing from the 11th–18th Century” international workshop, organized by me, to be held by our Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, in January 2025. *Baimiao* is not exclusive to China: Japan had also developed its own within the Yamato-e tradition as early as the 13th century. When considering this relationship between China and Japan, if we juxtapose European drawing and East Asian *baimiao*, is a connected global ink-monochromatic drawing *the* formal genre of art in the 18th century? This workshop will seek to address these questions and foster a dialogue among scholars from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, with the goal of publishing the proceedings as a collected volume of scholarly papers to reach an even wider audience.