

TAKING THE IMPERIAL CITY SPACE AS A CLUE: INTERPRETING THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF COURT FESTIVAL PAINTINGS IN THE QIANLONG ERA

Yuqi Wang* and Mumtaz Bt Mokhtar

Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

***Corresponding author:**
Yuqi Wang
2022175213@student.uitm.edu.my

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Before photography was introduced to China, realistic paintings were used to record important events and festive scenes in the court. Chinese and Western painters were often recruited to create paintings that served the court, due to the Qing emperor's strong interest in them. This study aims to analyze the artistic features and the emperor's artistic taste in festival court paintings in Qing China, as well as the scenes and connotations depicted in these works. Five representative court paintings depicting the Spring Festival during the Qianlong period were selected as research objects. Space is the guiding logic of this research, moving from parts of the imperial city to a panoramic view. The inner courtyard of the palace, the palace garden, the outer court, and the entire imperial city and its suburbs are explored in sequence. The research results found that festival paintings during the Qianlong period were a combination of Chinese and Western painting techniques, verve and precise forms, calligraphy and imagery. They embody five main connotations: 1) Festival painting is a medium for the emperor to display his will and imperial power; 2) It implies similar festival customs and cultures shared by the court and the people; 3) It reflects the diplomatic relations during his reign; 4) It shows Qianlong's good governance and the people's prosperity and happiness; 5) It expresses nature's and celestial phenomena's affirmation of Qianlong's imperial power. The festival paintings reflect ancient Chinese ideals of self-cultivation, family management, state governance, bringing peace to all under heaven, and the unity of heaven and man. By reconstructing the original context of Qing dynasty festival paintings, we find that the emperor sought to prove his orthodox status and achievements through various aspects.

Keywords: Art history; Chinese art; court painting; festival

1. INTRODUCTION

Qianlong (1711–1799) was an emperor with extremely high political literacy and unique artistic taste. The society of the Qing Dynasty became stable and prosperous under his reign. The peaceful social environment and the encouragement of the emperor promoted the development of culture and art, leaving many artworks with distinctive characteristics.

Ruyi Guan was a comprehensive art institution with departments of painting, mounting, jade carving, etc. *Huayuan Chu* was another painting institution. Both were established in the first year of Qianlong's reign. These painting institutions provided painters with good working environments, resource support, and opportunities, which helped preserve their works. Painters at the court were categorized into three grades according to a painting examination, and those appreciated by the emperor were selected to serve the inner court (Li, 2012). They carefully pondered the emperor's decrees, rigorously conceived their compositions, and conveyed stories with rich experience.

In the context of globalization in the nineteenth century, Giuseppe Castiglione and Jean-Damascène Sallusti from Italy, Jean-Denis Attiret from France, Ignatius Sichelbart from the Czech Republic, and other Western missionaries arrived in China, imparting knowledge of perspective, anatomy, colour, light and shadow pertinent to realistic painting. They worked with Chinese painters such as Xu Yang, Ding Guanpeng, and Zhang Weibang to amalgamate the philosophies and techniques of Chinese and Western painting, creating a unique court painting style. A large number of documentary paintings about political and military events, court rituals and sacrifices, and palace life were created by them.

This innovative style of court painting was a bold and beneficial attempt that significantly enhanced cultural exchanges between the East and the West. Its success was inseparable from the support of the royal court. During the Kangxi to Qianlong era of the Qing Dynasty, the country was relatively strong and more tolerant of foreign cultures. For Western missionaries, painting was a means to gain the emperor's trust and secure the opportunity to preach in China. However, the royal court did not support their missionary activities and merely regarded them as useful talents.

Festivals were an effective means for the ancient Chinese feudal class to maintain their rule. In the Forbidden City, the New Year's Day celebrated by "the first family" of the Qing Dynasty was more solemn and austere than that of ordinary families. For every important festival, the court would arrange for painters to create works to celebrate and commemorate. Festive entertainment and auspicious imagery were the two major themes of festival court painting. The earliest festival paintings had the function of driving away evil spirits (Bo, 2000). Court festival paintings represent the aesthetics and cultural values of the Qing Dynasty and provide a window through which we can catch a glimpse of palace life. This research attempts to understand the festival court paintings commissioned by Qianlong from multiple dimensions and uncover the hidden information within them.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative research is based on the historical research method and iconography method respectively, in the field of art history. Five festival court paintings created during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty were selected, including *Qianlongdi Suizhao Xingle Tuzhou* (Emperor Qianlong's New Year Entertainment), *Taiping Chunshi Tu* (Peaceful Spring Market), *Wanguo Laichao Tu* (Countries Coming to Pay Homage), *Jingshi Shengchun Shiyi Tu* (Early Spring in Beijing with Poetry), and *Riyue Wuxing Lianzhu Tu* (The Sun, Moon and Five Stars Resembling a String of Beads). In this research, the artistic characteristics of the festival court paintings are explored. Different geographical locations, festival scenes, and customs in these paintings are discussed, using space (from local to vast) as the narrative logic. The potential meanings of these festival paintings are analyzed from micro to macro perspectives.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Artistic characteristics of court festival painting

Since the reign of Emperor Kangxi, Western missionaries introduced their painting techniques to the East, which brought a shocking visual experience and broke traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts. The emperor ordered Castiglione and other missionaries to cooperate with Chinese painters to create a new painting style that he recognized as a blend of the best of the East and the West. The style of court paintings satisfied the ruler's aesthetic taste and political requirements, reflecting the country's orthodox style. During the Yongzheng Dynasty, Nian Xiyao and Castiglione co-edited *Shi Xue*, a book that introduced the principles of

Western perspective drawing to China. Court painting combined the Western perspective drawing method with the traditional Chinese *Sanyuan fa* (a method combining top view, upward view, and front view). It also emphasized artistic characteristics such as neatness, rigor, fine brushwork, graceful and luxurious colors, and realism.

Emperor Qianlong had extraordinary artistic talent and unique aesthetic taste. According to his poem ordering Jin Tingbiao to use Li Gonglin's "Five Horses" method to draw the Four Horses of Aiwuhan in the *Imperial Poems*, he proposed that Western painting possessed another kind of painting technique and appreciated the fine details of its colors. However, he believed that although Western paintings looked similar in appearance, they lacked the classical charm required to satisfy his expectations. In his view, the most perfect painting art combined the physical resemblance of Western paintings with the spiritual resemblance of Chinese paintings (Aixinjueluo, n.d.).

In addition, the court festival paintings of the Qing Dynasty usually combined calligraphy and painting. This integration enhanced the artistic expression and cultural connotation of the artworks. Creating festival court paintings was a bold and beneficial attempt three hundred years ago. However, by the end of the Qing Dynasty, with the decline of the state, the weakening of Jesuit influence, and the retirement of outstanding Western missionary painters, this style gradually declined.

3.2 Connotations of court festival painting

3.2.1 Court festival paintings and the emperor's will/imperial power

The *Qianlongdi Suizhao Xingle Tuzhou* (Emperor Qianlong's New Year Entertainment) (Figure 1) by Castiglione, Shen Yuan, and other painters depicts part of the inner court of the palace. In this painting, pine trees, plum blossoms, and rockery form the foreground, the cloisters of the palace comprise the middle ground, and mountains appear in the distance. Gourd-style lamps with lotus patterns hang under the eaves of the corridor. Gourd, pronounced fulu in Chinese, symbolizes fortune, happiness, and official rank. At the bottom right of the painting, Emperor Qianlong is seated between pillars with Spring Festival couplets, holding a jade *Ruyi* in his hand and wearing red *Ruyi* shoes, which symbolize auspiciousness and that everything goes as he wishes. Two maids stand behind him holding palace fans, and a boy beside Qianlong holds a *Ji* (halberd) with a *Qing* (chime) hanging on it. The combination of *Ji* and *Qing* sounds the same as *Ji Qing* (auspiciousness). Another boy holds a tray with a *Jinou Yonggu Cup* and a *Yuzhu Changdiao Candle*, both important ritual utensils in the emperor's first New Year schedule, the *Kaibi Ceremony* (writing the first word).

At the beginning of the new year, the emperor personally lit the *Yuzhu Changdiao Candle* (Figure 2) in a small compartment called *Ming Chuang* in the *East Warm Pavilion* of the *Yangxin Hall*, poured *Tusu Wine* into the *Jinou Yonggu Cup*, and incensed a Chinese brush made of evergreen wood on a stove, then wrote auspicious words in vermilion and ink. The *Jinou Yonggu Cup* (Figure 3) symbolizes the integrity and prosperity of the country, and *Tusu Wine* was believed to ward off evil spirits and eliminate disasters (He, 2021). In front of Qianlong, a boy is poking at a brazier with cypress branches. In the yard, one boy is covering his ears while igniting firecrackers with incense, others are holding a tray with apples and a butterfly toy. A fourth boy is holding sesame stalks, which the ancients believed could repel evil spirits by treading upon them. In the center of the picture, several children are making a snow lion, and a child in green is holding a puppet at the palace entrance.

Qianlong enjoyed having his portraits painted during festivals. On one hand, he wanted to show his orthodox status and ruling authority. Generally, royal court art aimed to make people believe in the virtue of the ruler and the stability and prosperity of the country under his rule. On the other hand, emperors in ancient China were particularly concerned about their posthumous reputations and tried to leave a positive impression on future generations through graceful portraits. To accommodate the emperor's taste, Western painters such as Castiglione employed frontal lighting, eliminated facial shadows, and reduced contrast. "The artist did not technically break the court artistic etiquette because the shadow was not used on the human figures" (Suebsantiwongse, 2021). Castiglione had angered Emperor Kangxi by drawing shadows on his face during his early years at court. After that, he delved deeper into Chinese culture and tried to better integrate Chinese and Western painting. Castiglione was adept at using dense Chinese pigments to make the picture delicate and layered. He reduced the traditional Chinese flat contour lines and used color to enhance the three-dimensionality of objects. Moreover, he used the inherent color method of Chinese painting rather than Western techniques that depict colors under varying light conditions.

Imperial power had a significant influence on festival paintings. The emperor, as both patron and client, participated in the production and design of paintings by proposing requirements, viewing samples, and evaluating finished works. The emperor expressed his expectations clearly, based on personal preferences, court customs, and political needs. Painters' autonomy and creativity were limited, as they had to follow imperial edicts. The draft preceding the final work was generally reviewed and approved by the emperor before proceeding. Painters expressed their loyalty to the emperor's regime, promoted his civil and military

achievements through art, and in return received his protection and rewards. The support and coordination of imperial power promoted the integration of Chinese and Western art in a relatively short period of time.



Figure 1: Emperor Qianlong's New Year Entertainment, 305 cm × 206 cm (Lang et al., 1711–1799)



Figure 2: Yuzhu Changdiao Candlestick (1736–1795)



Figure 3: *Jinou Yonggu Cup* (1736–1795)

3.2.2 Court festival paintings and folk customs

Taiping Chunshi Tu (Peaceful Spring Market) (Figure 4), created by Ding Guanpeng in 1742, depicts a Spring Festival market scene by the river in the outer garden of the palace. The painting is in the form of a long scroll, unfolded from right to left. There are a total of 106 people in the picture, with three main types of activities.

The first type: performance. A woman on the far-right side of the scroll and a man in the middle of the scroll both hold land boats. The land boat play is a folk dance performed with gongs, drums, and other musical instruments during the Chinese New Year. A man in blue is performing *the Taiping Drum*, which is unique to the Beijing area. When playing the Taiping drum, also called the New Year drum, people sing Taiping lyrics and dance, with the metal rings hanging under the handles of the drums making a clear and pleasant sound. To his left, a monkey show performer carries a monkey, monkey costumes, and colorful flags on his back, and holds a white-browed puppy in his hand. On the far-left side, a stall is performing a puppet show with many people watching. The second type: vendor. From right to left, there are stalls selling fireworks and firecrackers, a lantern seller in blue holding a round lantern and a goldfish lantern, vendors selling birds, fruit, snacks, and goldfish. Lastly, a vendor is selling groceries such as spears, bows and arrows, broadswords, masks, flutes, clay figures, and vases. Tourists—such as literati under the tree drinking tea and chatting, and a woman on the far left side looking out from behind a bamboo door—form the third type.

The painting relates to the royal trading street in the Qing Dynasty. In order to experience the folk customs and festive atmosphere of markets in the capital and Jiangnan, Qianlong built trading streets imitating these places in the royal gardens during festivals, including Tongleyuan trading street, Changchunyuán trading street, Qingyiyuan trading street, etc. The *Miscellaneous Notes of Bamboo Leaf Pavilion* (Yao, 1893) records that the Tongleyuan trading street was similar to the market outside the palace, with eunuchs dressed as vendors and buskers. The items sold on the street were collected from outside in advance. The purchased items were paid for after the event, and the unsold items were returned. Regrettably, the trading street was closed after the fourth year of Emperor Jiaqing's reign. In this picture, the large green pastel flowerpot next to the literati and the porcelain used for snacks with blue-and-white patterns and red dragon patterns are items from the palace, which also proves that this street was for royal use. Traditional festival customs reflect both the elegance of the court and the popularity of the folk. The court and the people shared the same vocabulary and customs during festivals. The spring market expresses the emperor's desire for national prosperity and happiness among the people.



Figure 4: Peaceful Spring Market, 30 cm × 233.5 cm (Ding, 1742)

3.2.3 Court festival paintings and diplomacy

Wanguo Laichao Tu (Countries Coming to Pay Homage) (Figure 5) depicts the outer and inner courts of the Forbidden City during the New Year. It was painted in 1761, the year of the Empress Dowager's 70th birthday.

The outer court is at the bottom of the painting. Between the Meridian Gate and the Gate of Supreme Harmony, and beside the Golden Water Bridge, envoys from various countries stand in designated areas, waiting for the emperor's arrival. Not only envoys from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Brunei, North Korea, and Kazakhstan but also distant emissaries from the Netherlands, Britain, France, and other countries across the Atlantic, are shown coming to pay tribute and meet the emperor. They wear the official uniforms of their countries, hold colorful flags bearing the country's name, ride elephants, and lead goats.

In Taihe Square, red-clad honor guards' line both sides of the road, with princes and ministers standing behind them. The ritual utensils of the honor guard in the painting are all recorded in the *Emperor's Travel Regulations of Illustration of Imperial Ritual Utensils, Volume 10* (Yun & Jiang, 2005a/1766), including the leopard tail spear, halberd, *Shu* (an ancient Chinese weapon), *Huagai* (nine dragons canopy/purple ganoderma canopy/green canopy), as well as ceremonial swords, bows, and arrows worn by soldiers. On both sides of the Gate of Supreme Harmony, musicians are playing the *Zhonghe Shao* music with specific instruments. *Zhonghe Shao* music is mainly used for sacrifices and imperial court assembly ceremonies. It represents the highest standard of court music in the Qing Dynasty's musical system. According to *Imperial Ritual Instruments, Volume 8* (Yun & Jiang, 2005b/1766), these instruments (Figure 6) include stone chimes, sheng, yu, guqin, drums, and bronze chime bells. In addition, sword-wielding guards are responsible for patrolling and policing the outer court. First-class guards wear black and white patterned robes (lynx skin), second-class guards wear leopard-patterned robes, and third-class and lanling (a rank) guards wear yellow robes (yellow fox fur) (Liu, 2004).

The spatial composition of the outer court is basically consistent with reality. However, that of the inner court shows some deviations, which may result from the painter's selection of important buildings and recomposing them within the painting. For example, the Xianruo Hall, the Buddhist Hall of the Empress Dowager, is on the left side of the Hall of Central Harmony in reality. However, the interior decoration of the emperor's position in the painting resembles a living room rather than a Buddhist Hall. Based on the surrounding buildings and Qianlong's living habits, the author believes that the painter intended to represent this location as the Hall of Mental Cultivation.

Qianlong's schedule on New Year's Day began with ancestor worship ceremonies. He then went to the Hall of Supreme Harmony to receive congratulations from officials, and afterward to the inner court to receive New Year's greetings from his concubines. Qianlong is depicted wearing a *Duanzhao* in front of the palace, a kind of ceremonial dress worn over the auspicious robe when offering sacrifices. Beneath the *duanzhao*, the edge of the bright yellow auspicious robe is faintly visible. This scene likely shows the emperor having just finished offering sacrifices to the Manchu gods and returning to the palace to rest (Liu, 2004). In the courtyard of the Yangxin Hall, eunuchs are carrying a bonsai, and a prince is setting off firecrackers. In the

West Sixth Palace area, altar tables with yellow cloth surrounds are set in two rooms, and concubines in auspicious clothing offer sacrifices. Moreover, it is noteworthy that, unlike among the folk, couplets in the court are written on white paper rather than red, to stand out more against the red walls.

The festival was an important opportunity for a political liaison with surrounding tribes. After Qianlong succeeded to the throne, he conducted ten major wars and achieved significant success in the border regions, expanding the territory to its greatest extent during the Qing Dynasty. As a result, more and more envoys from various countries and regions came to Beijing to pay homage to the Emperor, an act that he regarded as recognition of the legitimacy of his regime and the status of the country. Some countries did indeed send envoys during the Qing Dynasty, but not in such large numbers. According to records from New Year's Day in the 26th year of Qianlong's reign, the event in this painting is fictional.

Festival painting was an important strategy to record the emperor's achievements, promote imperial power and national prestige, and maintain political order. It is worth noting that there may be discrepancies between what the rulers intended the audience to see and what the audience actually perceived. Qianlong did lead the country into its heyday; however, it is ironic that the tragic wars, high military expenditures, and his pursuit of grand accomplishments and luxury contributed to gradual decline and civil unrest in his later years.

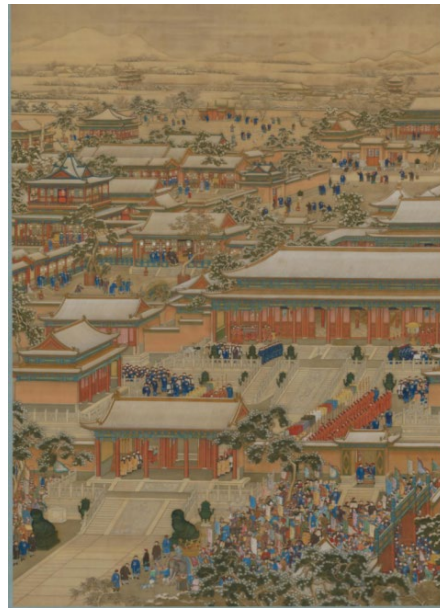


Figure 5: Countries Coming to Pay Homage, 299 cm × 207 cm (1762)



Figure 6: Instruments of Zhonghe Shao Music (1762)

3.2.4 Court festival paintings and national governance

Jingshi Shengchun Shiyi Tu (Early Spring in Beijing with Poetry) (Figure 7) by Xu Yang was painted in 1767. This painting depicts the entire capital from a bird's-eye view. On the central axis of Beijing, Zhengyangmen Street, Zhengyangmen Archery Tower, Zhengyangmen Gatehouse, Great Qing Gate, Tiananmen, Upright Gate, Meridian Gate, Forbidden City, Gate of Divine Prowess, and Jingshan extend from south to north. In addition, the *Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests* at the *Temple of Heaven* is in the southeast, while the Central Lake, South Lake, and the White Pagoda on Qiongdao Island are in the northwest. This painting provides a valuable reference for studying the panoramic view of the ancient capital.

The twenty spring poems written by Emperor Qianlong are the source of the content of this painting, which illustrates twenty New Year's customs. All these poems begin with the same sentence: Where is early spring born? He then wrote that spring is born in the New Year's court assembly, issuing decrees, writing blessing characters, spring couplets, giving New Year gifts, setting off firecrackers, praying for grain, playing New Year drums, skating performances, astrology, and more. For example, the bottom part of the image shows people buying New Year goods and giving them to one another. On the west side of Zhengyang Street, there are plaques for Suzhou and Hangzhou groceries, preserved eggs, Shaoxing papayas, and Jinhua hams. On the east side, there are plaques advertising silk, satin, and famous cigarettes. In Cining Palace, Emperor Qianlong, together with his ministers, is preparing to pay New Year greetings to the Empress Dowager, with honor guards lining both sides. On the frozen North Lake, members of the skating team are skating in two large spiral formations on the mirror-like ice. These poems are inscribed next to the corresponding scenes in the painting, demonstrating that the emperor, with high artistic literacy, often directly participated in the creation of paintings through inscriptions.

During the New Year, the imperial city is filled with an auspicious atmosphere, and people live in peace and happiness. This is the positive impact brought by Qianlong's good governance in his early reign. Respecting heaven and ancestors, working diligently, and caring for the people was the political program of the Qing Dynasty.

Culturally, as a foreign ruling power in the Central Plains, the Qing adopted Confucianism as its official ideology to gain recognition from the native population and promote social harmony and stability. Politically, Qianlong advocated benevolent government and people-oriented thought. First, he believed that effective management of local officials could nourish the people and promote local prosperity. Second, he implemented the general tax exemption system and exempted the whole country from taxes (money and grain) five times during his reign (Zhang & Lin, 2007). According to the *Records of the Emperor Gaozong of the Qing Dynasty* (n.d.): "The emperor should love his people and promote grace. It seems to be beneficial to the country when ministers say that national savings should be sufficient. In fact, they do not know that the people are the foundation of a country, and their suggestions should not be adopted." The universal exemption policy relieved farmers of complete dependence on the land. As a result, the small commodity economy and trade, especially the handicraft industry, developed rapidly across the country.

Advances in agricultural technology also increased food production. The early and middle periods of Qianlong's reign thus became a heyday of social development, achieving rapid population growth, with the rate ranging from 6–9%, the fastest in the Qing Dynasty (Zhu, 2012). Overall, this panoramic festival painting of the capital cleverly reflects Qianlong's achievements in governing the country from the perspective of ordinary people.



Figure 7: Early Spring in Beijing with Poetry, by Xu Yang, 256 cm × 233.5 cm (Xu, 1767)

3.2.5 Court festival paintings and natural providence

Riyue Wuxing Lianzhu Tu (The Sun, Moon and Five Stars Resembling a String of Beads) (Figure 8), painted by Xu Yang in 1761, depicts spatial scenes of the imperial city and its suburbs. On the first day of the lunar calendar that year, the sun and moon appeared in the sky simultaneously, with Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn aligned in a line. According to Zhao (2019), the scroll starts from the Tonghui River and Paozi River on the right side, continues west past the wall of the southeast corner, the observatory of Ziwei Hall in Dongbiaobei Hutong, the Dongdan Archway, then goes north along Dongdan Street to Jinyu Hutong. It then proceeds west past the Dongan Gate, the Huangeng Bridge, Donganli Gate, Donganmen Street, Donghuamen Street, the Tongzi River, and the Xima Monument, and finally arrives at the Donghua Gate of the Forbidden City.

A celestial globe and an elaborate equatorial armillary sphere (Figure 9) are depicted at the observatory, both of which are listed in *Imperial Ritual Instruments, Volume 3* (Yun & Jiang, 2005c/1766). In the 26th year of Qianlong's reign, the observatory contained eight instruments in total, though only two are shown here. In the scroll, the streets are bustling with traffic; civil and military officials are arriving in Beijing to pay homage to the emperor; street shops are opening for business; houses are decorated with colored paper and spring couplets; and some courtyards have tables set up for worship—together showing the vibrant and prosperous scene of Beijing on the first day of the New Year under Qianlong's reign. Xu Yang wrote an inscription at the end of the scroll: "The emperor has the virtue of diligence, so the auspicious celestial phenomena tells its own tale, and everyone is excited to see him" (Xu, 1761).

The ancients believed in a strong connection between natural phenomena and national destiny. The state established *Qin Tianjian* as an astronomical observation agency responsible for formulating calendars and observing celestial events. The annual Chinese calendar issued by Qin Tianjian served as an important guide for festivals, daily life, and agricultural production. Traditional Chinese astrology holds that celestial phenomena are closely linked to human affairs. After ascending the throne, Qianlong followed the tradition of respecting heaven and ancestors. Rulers in all Chinese dynasties regarded themselves as the Sons of Heaven, following divine will to uplift the people. The emperor derived recognition and obedience from officials and the populace through this divine emblem, thereby consolidating his dominion over society. Heaven, the mysterious enforcer of supreme order, was the source of spiritual belief and political legitimacy in ancient China. When rulers adhered to divine providence, good omens appeared; when they violated it, calamities followed.

During Qianlong's reign, the simultaneous appearance of the sun, moon, and five aligned planets was considered a highly auspicious sign, symbolizing the birth of a wise monarch. This festival painting conveys heaven's affirmation of the emperor's virtue and benevolent governance, and the people firmly believed that Emperor Qianlong would lead the empire to prosperity.



Figure 8: The Sun, Moon, and Five Stars Resembling a String of Beads, 48.9 cm × 1342.6 cm (Xu, 1761)

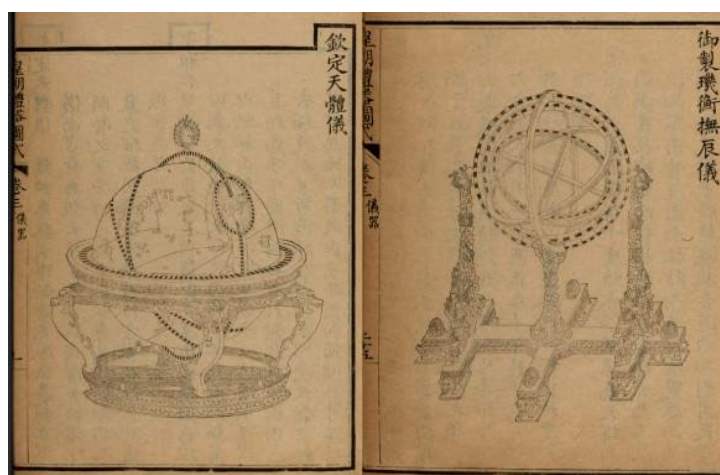


Figure 9: Celestial globe and elaborate equatorial armillary sphere (1762)

4. CONCLUSION

Court paintings in the Qing Dynasty have a unique style distinct from those of earlier periods. They combine the vivid color and realistic techniques of the West with the charm and philosophical depth of the East. These works are rich in content, with detailed depictions of customs, architecture, and natural landscapes. The function of festive court paintings is not only to enhance the celebratory atmosphere but also to convey layered meanings, reflecting Emperor Qianlong's intentions.

These five paintings are studied from micro to macro perspectives, following two logical threads. First, a spatial progression from paintings of the inner court of the palace, the outer garden, the outer court, the panoramic view of the imperial city, to the surrounding suburbs. Second, a thematic sequence examining imperial power, palace life, national governance, diplomacy, and nature worship respectively. Respecting heaven and ancestors, working diligently, and caring for the people was the political program of the Qing Dynasty. As patron, the emperor hoped that future viewers would see his excellence and the empire's prosperity through these paintings.

The rise and fall of court festival paintings closely mirrored that of Qing society. Though these splendid artworks celebrate Qianlong's great achievements in governance, his large-scale military campaigns and extravagant southern tours in later years, laid the foundation for the empire's eventual decline.

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