From Reading to Dressing: Portraiture of a Qing Empress in Gender and Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: This paper argues that the abundance in quantity and innovation of the painted and photographic portraits commissioned by Empress Dowager Cixi between the latter years of the 19th and early years of the 20th centuries, exceeded that of any other late Qing emperor or royal consort, and it is the diversity of gender references presented among them that is particularly distinctive. Through separating such a practice of ritualised "gender performance" into three stages, from 1) the 'masculinised' pose of "reading" appearing frequently in works of an earlier period, through 2) the gender-neutral divine imagery of dressing as a bodhisattva, to 3) the late-period feminised image of "dressing in front of the mirror", the purpose of this paper is to explore how gender is shown in a late Qing empress' portraiture, which is subject to multifarious changes dependent on different domestic and international political demands. The conclusion is that 1) on the international stage as set in the early years of the 20th century, the image of a late Qing empress dowager participated in the broader shaping of China's national image as something weak, feminine and disempowered, and 2) the essential incompatibility of Chinese and Western visual cultures was a major factor in the failures of the projection of the image of late Qing China overseas.

Keywords: Court portraiture, portraits at leisure, costume portraits, opera performance, gender performance, national image, visual cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of royal portraits at leisure (*xingletu*行樂圖) at the Qing court was at its height during the three reigns (of the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors) that together constituted the high Qing period spanning the 17th and 18th centuries; by the 19th century, it was in decline. A broad survey of 19th century Chinese royal portraits shows that not only were the taboos of close on a millennium still in effect as regards the modes of its dissemination and display - never going beyond the demands of exhibition within the palace and certainly no prospect of being viewed or owned by any common person; moreover, even when it came to the leisure portraiture shown only to a small audience within the confines of the palace and royal quarters of the royal household and the highest officials and courtiers, the creation of portraits of the emperor was no match for earlier eras in terms of quantity, quality, subject matter and the breadth, depth and innovation of methods employed. A comparison with the fabrication of the visual image of European rulers of the same period shows an opposite trend: in France, the centre of mainstream European art and culture at the time, imagined-reality images of rulers created by great artists (such as the equestrian portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps by Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *Napoleon I on the Imperial Throne*) had become one of common motifs in Neoclassical paintings on display to the public in the salon exhibitions, and most of them were overtly and tacitly engaged in constructing an image in the public perception of the male ruler as virile and invincible.

If we look back at the portraiture of Chinese rulers from this perspective of a comparison between east and west, one readily apparent distinction is that after the reign of Daoguang (1821-1850 CE), we do not again see the creation of any equestrian portraits of male rulers. In palace portraits at leisure from the reign of Xianfeng (1851-1861 CE) we find the emperor appreciating flowers and his consorts shown on horseback, not only contrary to the strategy of image construction for Western rulers of the time as expanders of national territory but also going against the mainstream gender references of China's own traditions in royal portraiture. It was only as late as the reigns of Tongzhi (1862-1874 CE) and Guangxu (1875-1908 CE) that the Qing court once again began to attach importance to the crafting of the image of the ruler, this being particularly the case in the years around the turn of the 20th century, which saw not only a revival in the number of portraits of the de facto ruler as represented by Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧1835-1908 CE), approaching the amounts seen during the three reigns of the high Qing, but also frequent unprecedented new departures in terms of medium, technique and modes of dissemination. During this time, given Cixi's status as a female ruler, the fabrication of her portraiture often displays a simultaneous adherence to the traditions of both

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portraying an emperor and portraying a royal consort, which has led to scholarly dispute on the question of the gender pointers in her portraits at leisure [1]. Two photographs of Cixi "dressing before a mirror" (Figures **1** and **2**) have attracted scholarly inquiry into the intent behind their creation and the power and gender references they exhibit, because their coquettish, clearly feminised pose does not accord with the tradition of ruler portraiture [2].

Given that existing research largely treats portraiture of Cixi as an immutable whole, this paper will contend rather that in the portraiture of late Qing rulers as represented by Cixi, there is no inherent, fixed and ever-stable, unchanging character to the gender characteristics shown at different periods and in different contexts. Firstly, there is a periodisation in which the portraiture of Cixi develops between early and later, from the borrowing of masculine signifiers in the early period, through apotheosis to divinity of fluid gender characteristics, to the ultimate fashioning of a feminine image of youthful beauty for display in the international arena. Second, these displays of gender are by no means the product of a free choice but rather adopted in light of the limits of particular sets of existential circumstance and constructed on a foundation both ritualised and repeatedly rehearsed. Lastly, this kind of ritualised and performative display was further restricted by the political demands and influence of the social context of different periods, both domestically and internationally, and suffered inevitable misreadings in the process of the dissemination of the imagery.

Figure 1: "The Empress Dowager Cixi", glass plate negative, 24.1 x 17.8 cm (9.5 x 7 in), Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: FSA A.13 SC-GR-251.

Figure 2: "The Empress Dowager Cixi with attendants in front of Paiyunmen, Summer Palace, Beijing", glass plate negative, 24.1 x 17.8 cm (9.5 x 7 in), Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: FSA A.13 SC-GR-260.

In light of the above, this paper takes as its subject the portraiture of Cixi in paintings and photographs created in the period from the Tongzhi reign through to the latter years of the Guangxu reign. Finer divisions are made on multiple levels, such as period of creation, relevant themes and expected audience. The aim is to explore how a portraiture of a late Qing empress founded on "gender performance" developed from an earlier dependence on masculine iconography to the later prevalence of feminised symbolism and also how during this process of transition the portrayal of the empress (one that has been described as a "harbinger of modern New Woman characteristics" [3]) made use of different gender symbolic imagery to construct a particular image of power. From that we will go on to consider the convergence of such an image of an eastern ruler with the feminised foreignness of Asia in the western world's imagination, leading to an outcome where the image of a ruler constructed in a native context was not only subject to a gender reversal on the international stage, but also an overturning of a more fundamental nature in its meanings of power.

DISCUSSION

Stage 1. Portraits while Reading: Gender Divisions as Visual References to Court Politics

The political implications of Cixi's early period portraiture are quite prominent when compared to traditional court paintings of emperors and their consorts. Among the Cixi portraiture still extant, "Portrait of Cixi in Everyday Costume" (Figure **3**) and "Portrait of Cixi in Liturgical Costume" are widely

considered to be two of the earliest examples in painting form, likely executed during the Tongzhi reign. The main basis for this dating is that the size of the paintings, postures of their subjects and their structure closely resemble a portrait of Empress Dowager Ci'an (慈安1837-1881 CE), "*Ci zhu yan qing* [慈竹延清tender bamboo prolongs purity]" that carries a handwritten dedication by Tongzhi (Figure **4**) [4]. Royal household accounting records for handicrafts expenditures have an entry for the fourth year of the Tongzhi reign (1865 CE) stating that in the fourth lunar month that year, artisan painters in the Ruyi Studio were charged with painting portraits of "their Two Majesties" Ci'an and Cixi, which were finished and mounted in the sixth month [5]. Some scholars identify the paintings mentioned in this entry with the pair of portraits at leisure of the two dowager empresses in the palace gardens, "Portrait of Ci'an in Casual Dress", an alternative title for "*Ci zhu yan qing*", and "Portrait of Cixi in Everyday Dress," noting further that the date of their execution as recorded in palace records just so happens to fall within a month of the removal from office of Yixin, Prince Gong (恭親王奕訢). It is speculated that the faintly-smiling, relaxed and composed demeanour of the two dowager empresses in these portraits is a manifestation of satisfaction at their success in this episode of court intrigue and power struggle [6]. Both empresses are pictured amid the groves and rockeries of the imperial gardens, in similar postures so that they appear to be sitting across from one another, both wearing everyday dress made of cloth with a 'longevity' character medallion pattern, one in blue, the other in red, their hair both dressed in the "two-handfuls" (*liangbatou*兩把頭) style common among consorts. The portraits differ in that Ci'an is accompanied by flowers of various colours in front and behind, while Cixi is shown beside table and daybed holding a folding fan, accompanied by an open book and cup of tea. Ci'an's setting is in keeping with the traditional format of portraiture showing palace women appreciating flowers, while Cixi is shown in a way that tends more towards the format for portraits of the emperor at leisure, in which books are a common accoutrement.

Figure 3: "Portrait of Cixi in Everyday Dress", coloured ink on paper, 130.5 x 67.5cm, collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 4: "Portrait of Ci'an in Casual Attire (*ci zhu yan qing*)", 1860s-70s, coloured ink on paper, 130.5 x 67.5cm, collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 5: "Portrait of Cixi in Liturgical Dress", coloured ink on paper, 130.5 x 67.5cm, collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 6: "Portrait of Ci'an in Casual Attire (*xuan lan ri yong*)", 1860s-70s, coloured ink on paper, 169.5 x 90.3cm, collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

"Portrait of Cixi in Liturgical Dress" (Figure **5**), similar in size and pose of subject to the two portraits of the empresses discussed above, is often compared to another semi-outdoor portrait with the subject sat below the eaves of a palace hall, "Portrait of Ci'an in Casual Attire (*xuan lan ri rong* 璇蘭日永)" (Figure **6**). It is apparent that these two paintings of the empresses draw on the two visual traditions of portraits at leisure of palace consorts and the emperors respectively. Ci'an's hair is dressed in a *liangbatou* style and she wears plain and simple casual attire. The painting has dispensed with any emphasis on the colourful flowers in the garden or on the table beside Ci'an, with the latter otherwise set only with a round fan, a suitable accoutrement for a palace lady, bringing a clearly feminine atmosphere to the entire mis-en-scene. Cixi by contrast sports an opulent *dianzi* (鈿子) headdress and is dressed in liturgical robes of bright yellow that announce clearly her high status; of especial note is the way she holds a snuff bottle, a gesture most commonly seen in portraits at leisure of the Qing emperors (such as "Portrait of Daoguang with Snuff Bottle" and "Portrait of Tongzhi in Casual Attire.") Furthermore, scholars have noted the *ruyi* (如意) sceptre placed on the table Cixi sits besides, an object usually appearing in masculine spaces associated with literati and gentlemen of the court, and an especial favourite of the Qianlong Emperor. These pictorial elements bring markedly masculine qualities to this portrait of Cixi and interpolate it into a male space [7]. Further still, in a portrait executed somewhat later than the preceding examples, "The Xiaoqin Empress Playing Chess" (Figure **7**), there is a clear reference to the political implications of past portraiture of emperors playing this game of strategy; the scene of Cixi playing against an opponent who is one of the palace men [8] hints at Cixi's powers as a woman ruler to participate in politics and discuss national affairs.

Figure 7: "The Xiaoqin Empress Playing Chess," coloured ink on silk, 231.8 x 142cm, collection of Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 8: "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume," coloured ink on silk, 191.2 x 100cm, collection of Palace Museum, Beijing.

In conclusion, the early portraiture of Cixi during the 19th century mostly borrowed male symbology,

distinguishing portraits of Cixi from other portraits at leisure of consorts and court ladies and bringing them instead within the visual tradition of portraits at leisure of the emperor. This can be cross-referenced against the portraiture of other emperors and consorts produced in the same period. These portraits were only displayed within the inner court, in particular the female space where the court women were active, and the intended audience did not extend beyond the inner court. The intent behind the use of male symbology to strengthen Cixi's control over a traditionally male space of power and her controlling authority in the inner court remained the same through the latter half of the 19th century, from the Xinyou Coup of 1862 on through the Boxer Rebellion of 1900s, the period when Cixi ruled, and through her struggles for power at court and efforts to consolidate domestic political power.

Stage 2. Portraits in Buddhist Costume: Apotheosis as All-Powerful Cross-Gender Deity

Cixi appears in liturgical attire in multiple portraits, a marked contrast with Ci'an who is more usually depicted in plain and simple everyday attire, and there has been scholarly discussion of the political ambitions and Cixi's seeking after power that this implies. That is not all; another portrait of Cixi in liturgical attire, "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume" (Figure **8**), takes portraiture of the empress dowager manifesting control in the real-world political space and extends it into a spiritual command in the world of religion. Researchers have drawn a link between this "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume" and the empress dowager's "everyday" religious praxis [9] and indeed, when compared to other images where Cixi dresses up as Guanyin (the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara's most familiar Chinese incarnation), this portrait does impart a far more "everyday" impression. Any such impression does not, however, prove that this is an "everyday" portrait; it still remains a deliberate act of visual construction. Firstly, Cixi's bright yellow liturgical robes with dragon-pattern embroidery that occupy the most prominent spot in the centre of the painting are a clear marker of her real-world status as secular ruler; what the viewer sees is seemingly the "everyday" appearance of a ruling figure from the Qing court. Second, the ornaments and furnishings depicted in great detail, such as her Five-Buddha Crown, "cloud collar" shoulder-piece, lotus-pattern thick-soled shoes, vase emblazoned with the character for 'Buddha' and lotus-form seat gives the viewer a sense that they are looking at Cixi's "everyday" accoutrements and use-items. Last, we have the screen in the background with half its frame and base visible, very different from the way backdrops and screens appear in other portraits where Cixi takes the guise of Guanyin, with their edges not in view so as to create a more complete fantasy setting. In "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume", the viewer is deliberately shown the screen as item of "everyday" furniture, as if this were some random snapshot of a moment in the empress dowager's "everyday" life.

Even so, there are three corresponding levels on which the deliberately constructed "everyday" image described above can by interpreted as "de-normalising". Firstly, although the status of liturgical attire is slightly lower than that of ceremonial costume worn for major royal sacrificial occasions, it presents as far grander that everyday attire worn regularly and can be considered formal attire, worn only on a few days around occasions such as major festivals or celebratory feasts. This means that images of Cixi dressed in liturgical attire in the guise of Guanyin cannot strictly speaking be regarded as either evidence of her "everyday" religious praxis or a straightforward visual reproduction of the same. Moreover, ornamentation such as the Five-Buddha Crown or the cloud collar shoulder-piece are by no means items of "everyday" court attire but rather classic costume items from someone playing the part of Guanyin on stage in some opera performances. Lastly, regarding the screen that appears in the painting, it seems to hint at the real-world setting and space in which this painting was executed, yet it does not depict information of any sort as to where in the palace the painting took place or the specific palace venue Cixi used when dressing up as Guanyin; instead, it is a continuation of the function and connotations of the screen in the Chinese painting tradition [10]. The bamboo grove on the screen as a "painting within the painting" is a figurative reference to Cixi's identity when she dresses as Guanyin, with the frame of the screen demarcating political, religious and other relationships where there is a distinction between inside and out.

Between these two portraits of Cixi in liturgical attire we can also see a shift in the main strategic focus of the creation of her portraits across different periods. In the earlier creation, "Portrait of Cixi in Liturgical Attire" (Figure **5**), Cixi is placed amid pine and cypress groves in front of a palace hall, a scene somewhat reminiscent of the portrait of Tongzhi reading "*Youyi yiqing*"(遊藝怡情), and we have noted above how Cixi holds a snuff bottle and the placement of the *ruyi* sceptre, details which also create an intertextuality with

previous examples of portraits at leisure of the Qing emperors and show Cixi's control over male space. In the somewhat later creation, "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume" (Figure **8**) [11], the way Cixi employs pictorial symbols as described above is focused on crafting her religious image (or more precisely, her image as Guanyin). In this sense, if we say that the earlier portrait adopts a pictorial strategy of de-feminisation, embodying Cixi's control over traditionally male spaces within the palace and the male political power they represent, then in the later portrait in liturgical attire, "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume," Cixi is employing the particular religious characteristics of the image of Guanyin – already a figure of ambiguous gender and repository for multiple folk beliefs – to show her attempt to escape the conventional limitations of gender and power and achieve a control that extends into faith and the spiritual realm, as represented by the deity Guanyin.

The Qing imperial house subscribed to multiple religious beliefs and court funding of religious activities extended to shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhism from the Han traditions, and Daoism. Some scholars posit a close relationship between the coexistence of multiple religious traditions at the Qing court with the extension through political and military conquest into inner Asia of the Manchurian understanding of ethnicity and model of governance [12]. Among the portraits of previous Qing emperors in the guise of religious figures we have Yongzheng variously dressed as a lama in the Tibetan tradition meditating in a cave and as a Daoist adept summoning the Dragon King; and Qianlong dressed as the bodhisattva Samantabhadra watching his servants wash his white elephant steed, as the Tibetan version of the bodhisattva Manjusri sitting erect at the centre of a thangka or as Manjusri in the Han tradition, bare-chested and belly exposed. Scholars have noted that when these emperors transformed themselves into different deities, it was with the intention of using their portrait in guise to strengthen their political control over different religions and ethnicities [13]. The women of the Qing court have also left us numerous portraits that have associations with religious practice, such as Empress Xiaozhuang in Tibetan monk's robes or Empress Xiaoquancheng as a Daoist immortal in Han costume, carrying a whisk as she floats amid auspicious clouds.

However, unlike these portraits in religious guise of previous emperors, those of Cixi do not include wide-ranging experimentation with a variety of outlandish costume, nor does she share previous emperors' predilections for dressing up as a variety of deities, but rather she concentrates on repeated creation of portraits in the guise of Guanyin in different costumes, settings and poses. Although the words "Buddhist costume" appear in the title of "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume" (Figure **8**), Cixi has not donned a classic Buddhist monk's robe or a gown like Guanyin's, researchers have noted via a pictorial interpretation of her headgear, other adornments and the setting, that in this portrait Cixi is not dressing up as some other Buddha or Buddhist religious but as Guanyin herself [14]. Dressing up as Guanyin was likely a type of religious practice among devotees of the bodhisattva during the Ming and Qing [15]. In the extant portraiture of Cixi dressed as Guanyin, there are five other images where she employs the "Five-Buddha Crown" prop besides its use in "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume". In the catalogue of photographic portraits of Cixi created in September 1903, *Sheng rong zhang* (聖容帳Catalogue of images of the sacred countenance), there is a special entry for "ten photographs of the sacred countenance wearing a Five-Buddha Crown." A type of "vairocana hat", the Five-Buddha Crown first appears in folk Buddhist ceremonies to appease virulent ghosts popular during the Ming and Qing. The presiding monk at such ceremonies would wear such a crown at the altar to first symbolically summon the "Five Wisdom Buddhas" of the "Five Aggregate Realms" and then invite Guanyin to be present, after which the presiding monk would become one with Guanyin, so that the ceremony was now conducted by Guanyin made incarnate in the monk [16]. On such occasions the wearer of the Five-Buddha Crown would be male, then this man would transform into the bodhisattva Guanyin, who from Ming times onwards "was considered to be entirely female" [17]. Ultimately, this ceremonial exercise to save the departed souls of a particular location can only formally commence after the man presiding has, by donning the Five-Buddha Crown, transformed into Guanyin who manifests in the form of a female deity. This means that the initial gender of the wearer of the crown is male and he transforms into or plays the part of a female deity. Thus in a religious ceremonial sense, in "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume", when Cixi takes on the guise of Guanyin she is displaying a female image but what she confirms is her masculine status within this context as a wielder of power.

A Five-Buddha Crown appears on numerous occasions in tableaux photographs of Cixi, an essential prop of her photographs in guise, and she is not the

only subject to be seen wearing it. All the extant photographs of Cixi dressed as Guanyin that this author has been able to view show two or three figures gathered around a standing or sitting Cixi in the centre and can be classified into three types according to the different models by which the persons photographed are arranged. The first type consists of two examples of Cixi dressed as Guanyin with her attendants Li Lianying and Cui Yugui wearing Five-Buddha Crowns and *kasaya* robes. In one of these examples, all three persons wear a crown with Cixi seated in the centre and her two eunuch attendants to either side (Figure **9**); in the other, her attendants stand to either side wearing Five-Buddha Crowns while Cixi stands in the centre wearing a "Guanyin bonnet" adorned with lotus flowers (Figure **10**). It is apparent that while Cixi is not the only person to be portrayed wearing a Five-Buddha Crown, there have been no other examples where another palace woman is shown wearing one. In this set of photographs, when her two eunuch attendants dress up as monks in *kasaya* robes wearing such a crown [18], while Cixi chooses either a crown or a Guanyin bonnet, we have a scene that conforms to Buddhist ceremonial procedure such as the ceremony for appeasing lost souls mentioned above: after the presiding monk in his kasaya robe (Li Lianying or Cui Yugui) puts on a Five-Buddha Crown and summons the Five Wisdom Buddhas, Guanyin (Cixi) manifests in real corporal form. Where this differs is that Guanyin cannot appear in such a real form in the folk ceremony, only being able to borrow the fleshly body of the presiding monk by means of incarnation or possession to then oversee the conduct of the ceremony, whereas in this set of photographs, the presiding monk (Li or Cui) has summoned Guanyin (Cixi) in real corporal form. Scholar Li Yuhang has noted that when Cixi is not wearing a Five-Buddha Crown, the Guanyin bonnet she dons instead is in actuality a classic visual symbol that confirms Guanyin's female identity, with the flower hair adornments only underlining the gender reference [19]. In this sense, this series of photographs takes a "goddess" invisible in Buddhist ceremonial and makes her "real" and visible in the female figure of Cixi. The emphasis on gender in the form of accoutrements such as the flower hair ornaments is something avoided entirely in the creation of early portraiture of Cixi (as we have seen in our discussion in the first section of this paper of the strategies by which the fashioning of Cixi's portraiture was distinguished from that of Ci'an).

Figure 9: "Sacred Countenance Wearing a Five-Buddha Crown", photograph, collection of Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 10: "The Empress Dowager Cixi in the guise of Avalokitesvara" glass plate negative, 24.1 x 17.8 cm (9.5 x 7 in), Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: FSA A.13 SC-GR-245.

Figure 11: "The Empress Dowager Cixi in the guise of Avalokitesvara", glass plate negative, 24.1 x 17.8 cm (9.5 x 7 in), Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: FSA A.13 SC-GR-246.

Figure 12: "Sacred Countenance Wearing a Five-Buddha Crown" , photograph, collection of Palace Museum, Beijing.

We have two examples of a second type of Five-Buddha Crown-wearing Guanyin portrait, in which Cixi dresses as Guanyin, Li Lianying is dressed as Dharma Protector Skanda (*Weituo*) and lady-in-waiting Sigege (四格格Fourth Princess) is dressed as the Dragon Girl (Figure **11**); all three subjects are standing with Cixi in the centre wearing her Five-Buddha Crown. A third type, of which we have one example (Figure **12**), has Cixi dressed as Guanyin, Li Lianying dressed as Skanda and Sigege and other ladies-in-waiting dressed as the Dragon Girl; here Cixi is seated centrally wearing her Five-Buddha Crown. In these two latter types of photographic portrait, although the number of subjects differs, all have Cixi placed centrally with her male and female attendants arranged on either side [20]. In the extant photographic portraiture of Cixi in the guise of Guanyin that includes our above three types, writing appears on a sign in the background above Cixi's head, either in a cloud-pattern frame or on a scroll, reading "*Putuo shan Guanyin dashi*"(普陀山觀音大士) – "Master Guanyin of Mount Potalaka". "Guanyin of Mount Potalaka" refers to the "Guanyin of the Southern Seas," a feminine form of the bodhisattva popular in the Ming and Qing, while the more masculine soubriquet "Master" is an honorific accorded this feminised Guanyin. In fact, in China, Guanyin's gender was always susceptible to change. On the one hand, the image of Avalokitesvara has in itself a history of changing gender. Pre-Tang, Avalokitesvara was a male deity, but a steady process of feminisation began in the 11th century, until by the 15th century, the bodhisattva had become entirely female. On the other hand, the form Avalokitesvara took presented as a variety of "incarnations" of varying gender depending on the demands of particular sets of believers. Right on into the Ming, although the image of Avalokitesvara/Guanyin was feminine in its fundamentals, among the various incarnations of the bodhisattva, male forms would still appear from time to time [21].

The issue of crossing gender in the portraits of Cixi dressed as Guanyin often came to be closely linked to questions of "modernity" raised by new portrait mediums, as coming into the 20th century they were reproduced using the modern medium of photography. Scholars have remarked that Cixi constructed a fictional persona of herself as Guanyin through imagining how she was seen; this being so, by selecting the already gender-ambiguous deity Guanyin as subject for her costume performance, what is actually being projected in these portraits is the dowager empresses' highly paradoxical gender identity. In her costumed portraits Cixi is exploring and practising "the very possibility of gender performance" [22]. Put another way, the essence of Cixi's costume portraiture is not any attempt to perform masculinity or femininity but a presentation of the possibility of crossing genders. Carlos Rojas draws a link between the performative nature of gender identity, the transcendence of crossing genders and the modern gaze: premodern visual reproduction is basic and a plain mirror reflection, visual reproduction in the modern sense is based on a two-way model of gaze, of "seeing and being seen," hence the reproduction of gender identity is a performative construct. In this sense, Rojas claims that Cixi's early 20th century photographic portraiture in costume marks a watershed between pre-modern and modern visual representation [23].

In the years 1903 and 1904, besides having the above series of photographs taken, Cixi also gave permission for the American painter Katherine Carl to come to the palace to paint her portrait in oils and to send the resulting painting for display at the World's Fair in St. Louis. In 1905, another artist, Hubert Vos, came to the palace and following the dowager empresses' request to be beautified, executed a portrait in oils of the septuagenarian Cixi without a single spot or wrinkle. Yet the excessively youthful beautification Cixi requested for these portraits in oils is not readily apparent in the photographic portraits of her in the guise of Guanyin. Chün-fang Yü notes that "Ming and Qing representations of Guanyin show her as an

older motherly figure… it is the image of a matriarch with authority, wisdom and power…yet entirely absent of any gender markers" [24], an image whose origins can likely be traced to the native Chinese tradition of worshiping "mother" goddesses and the social actuality of older women becoming clan matriarchs within the Confucian tradition. In vernacular literary formats such as opera and novels, older women were often portrayed in roles where they held together a family or social relationship. Hence, the tendency was to portray Guanyin as an older woman, "playing a central guiding role in both spiritual awakening and earthly happiness" [25]. In this sense, unlike the strategy of early portraiture of Cixi with its borrowing of a large amount of male visual symbolism, her later portraiture presents a creative strategy of "crossing" or even "transcending" gender and transformation into a deity of "neuter gender", such that the message sent out in much of her portraiture dressed as Guanyin is of Cixi having this role of authority-wielding matriarch: standing at the top of the patriarchal system of rank inside the royal household and presenting to the outside the image of an older woman without any clear markers of gender.

In her research into beliefs surrounding Guanyin, Chün-fang Yü writes "I am not aware of any other emperor claiming to be an incarnation of Kuan-yin other than in the late Qing at the end of the 19th century when Cixi dressed up as the bodhisattva as a diverting entertainment and for theatrical effect" [26]. This confirms the uniqueness of Cixi adopting the guise of Guanyin and points out the close link between her costume performance and her love of opera, yet on the other hand it is also a reflection of how since the fall of the Qing Cixi has become generally demonised in the eyes of both the public and scholars and the artistic activities associated with her roundly rejected as "diverting entertainments" that were a disaster for people and nation [27].

In the Qing court tradition of portraits in costume, if we compare examples from Cixi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, a clear difference is that Cixi does not try out a broad range of outlandish costumes and does not dress up as a number of different deities as the previous emperors did, instead concentrating entirely on repeatedly appearing in the guise of Guanyin. Bearing in mind Cixi's love of opera and the regular palace performances of operas in praise of Guanyin such as "*Da Xiangshan* (大香山Incense Mountain)" and "*Quan shan jin ke* (勸善金科Golden rules for promoting virtue)" [28], it is generally held that Cixi dressing up as Guanyin was behaviour directly influenced by dramatic performance, with Chün-fang Yü's characterisation of opera as a "diversion" we saw above a representative view. Yet although Cixi's dress-up was to a large extent influenced by opera, and opera indeed functions as an entertainment or diversion, even involving the waste of a great deal of resources, are these "diversions" definitely really a "de-politicised" form of pure consumption? Actually, Cixi frequently took part personally in arranging operatic performances and often signalled her political intentions through her choice of opera and interventions in the way it was performed. During the Hundred Days of Reform (1898 CE), she took a personal hand in an adaptation of the opera *Zhaodai Xiao Shao* (昭代蕭韶Opera for an Age of Good Governance) [29], and richly rewarded the actor playing Empress Dowager Xiao (蕭太後) for creating a way of walking the stage that emulated Empress Dowager Cixi's own bearing [30]. Cixi also adapted Tan Xinpei's classic work *Tian lei bao* (天雷報 Retribution by Thunderbolt) in a way that clearly insinuated her displeasure at the Guangxu emperor [31].

As regards the influence of operatic performance on Cixi dressing up as Guanyin, in general terms it manifested on three levels. First, direct observation shows that Cixi's guise drew directly on elements found in Qing court opera costume; although her special costume was fundamentally to her own design with the addition of auspicious symbols displaying royal glory and wishing for longevity, its visual forms remained firmly within the scope of theatrical costume. Second, regarding the watched experience and action of performing and wearing costume, the portraiture where Cixi appears in the guise of Guanyin touches on the relationship between Cixi as "performer" and Guanyin as "role", which in turn relate to issues of theatrical performance such as sense of stage and theatricality [32], a reflection of the way in which Cixi's appearance in Guanyin costume is linked to her experiences as opera viewer and opera performer. Lastly, regarding dissemination of the portraiture, that photographs of Cixi in the guise of Guanyin were on sale resembles the costume portraiture and portraits in make-up popular in the photo studios of early 20th century China [33]. In this sense, it was almost inevitable that photographic portraits of Cixi as Guanyin leaked from the palace to go on general sale as an item of cultural consumption would come to be seen as depoliticised "diversions".

Cixi's portraiture in costume as Guanyin was indeed influenced by opera performance, but if we return to

Cixi's choice of the Guanyin the deity, the question remains as to why Cixi chose this bodhisattva among all the many possible opera characters. To take it a little further, besides the self-evident "diversionary" functions of these Guanyin images drawing on opera performance, what else did they mean to the empress? Beyond the uniquely Chinese cross-gender malleability of Guanyin discussed above, in Ming and Qing times the deity appealed to a diverse range of audiences of the faithful across Buddhism, Daoism, newly-emerging folk beliefs (such as Yiguandao一貫道, Zaili teachings 在理教 and Xiantiandao 先天道) and the "domesticated religiosity" of pious women [34].

Beyond this, we have a passage recorded in the memoir of Princess Der Ling of something Cixi said in July 1903. Cixi speaks directly about her reasons for dressing up as Guanyin in her own words:

> I have also another good idea, and that is I want to have one taken as 'Kuan Yin' (Goddess of Mercy). The two chief eunuchs will be dressed as attendants. The necessary gowns were made some time ago, and I occasionally put them on. Whenever I am angry, or worried, dressing up as the Goddess of Mercy helps me to calm myself, so that I can play the part I represent. I can assure you that it helps me a great deal, as it makes me remember that I am looked upon as being all-merciful. By having a photograph taken of myself dressed in this costume, I shall be able to see myself as I ought to be at all times [35].

The quote was originally given in English and published in the US in 1912, Der Ling translating Cixi's "Guanyin" as "the Goddess of Mercy". This meant that in an English-language context, Cixi taking the guise of Guanyin was directly ascribed to a transformation into a female deity. Other information can be gleaned from this passage of reported speech: firstly, that Cixi felt an actual need to dress as Guanyin before creating her costume tableaux; it is apparent that it means more to Cixi than just modelling for a painting or photograph, it is a means of addressing feelings of anger and worry, a type of psychological self-healing. Second, the experience of changing into a costume to play the part of Guanyin, modelling the image of the Guanyin of her imagination through costume and adornments, constructs an identification in which she becomes Guanyin and this in turn affects her conduct, the positive image of Guanyin as "all-merciful" being super-imposed on her inner self. Lastly, she fixes the moment of becoming "all-merciful" and makes it material, creating a photograph that can be viewed at any time, crafting an idealised self-image as deity that the Cixi of real life, still sometimes angry or worried and not yet realising her "all-merciful" ideal, can "see herself" in.

Here, the subject in the fixed gaze that the "seeing" in "seeing myself" involves seems to be only Cixi herself. If we return to the process of creating painted and photographic portraits in costume, the "seeing" is in fact the work of the palace painters and the royal photographer. However, as more marginal figures within the court, their gaze cannot play a truly decisive role in the costume portrait, the painters and photographer needing to ask for and receive permission to carry out each part of the creative process. Real control of the process of creating the portraiture lies in Cixi's hands. Hence, in terms of the process by which these costume portraits are created, they are first and foremost self-portraits that Cixi uses to "see myself".

In the passage Cixi also notes "I am looked upon as" – she is also aware of how she is being seen in the process of dressing up as Guanyin, which relates to the expected gaze and audience she has in mind when she dons her Guanyin costume. If we consider the dissemination of these photographs, particularly those in costume, we find they become available outside the palace the very year of their creation or during the year following, on sale or appearing in Chinese and overseas mass-market publications. Not only did Cixi not forbid this, she even frequently distributed paintings and photographs of herself in costume in the form of gifts to palace officials and foreign friends [36], so these portraits in costume were no longer just self-portraits for Cixi to see herself in, she expected them to be seen in public and used them to display a public image.

To sum up, in the latter years of the Guangxu reign, Cixi appears more often in the guise of Guanyin, and in the early years of the 20th century particular, not only did Cixi present scroll paintings of herself as Guanyin to favoured courtiers, she even permitted photographs of herself in the guise of Guanyin to be sold publicly in domestic publications. A deity who in the Chinese context is of ambiguous gender displayed the possibilities of a cross-gender "gender performance" still more strongly through Cixi's appearances in theatrical costume. Although such dressing up might

appear "everyday" or a mere "diversion", it can be said that by dressing as a deity when she made her image material via the process of creating a portrait, Cixi had transformed herself from the occupier of male power spaces of her early period into a spiritual commander of multiple arenas of religious belief, and through transcending gender showed herself in the role of matriarch at the very top of the traditional Chinese hierarchy of status.

Stage 3. Portraits at Toilette: From Matriarch to Oriental Beauty

Two extant portraits of Cixi "at toilette" are mentioned in the introduction to this paper, a group photograph taken in front of Paiyunmen at the Summer Palace (Figure **2**) and a solo portrait dressing in front of a mirror (Figure **1**); these have attracted scholarly attention because of the feminine pose, unlike anything seen previously in portraiture of a Chinese ruler. David Hogge thinks there must be some special meaning to Cixi repeatedly allowing herself to be photographed in these "feminised" poses, given her former scrupulous adherence to the rules of tradition [37]. A comparison reveals clear differences in terms of "feminisation" between Cixi's "dressing at a mirror" portrait and traditional "pictures of beauties" showing women at toilette before a mirror [38]. In paintings that depict traditional scenes of women at toilette, the presence of the woman in the painting is one of waiting for a man who will soon arrive or serving to please a man not present (such as Qiu Ying's painting "The highest-ranking imperial concubine at her toilette" *Guifei xiaozhuang tu*貴妃曉妝圖), with the control and ownership the absent man exercises over the woman portrayed and the space she occupies often shown metaphorically in the painting via words or images [39]. Cixi's portraits "dressing at the mirror", by contrast, everywhere display her own control and ownership over traditionally male power and space.

However, because these two "toilette" photographs differ as regards the space in which they take place, the arrangement of subjects, the way in which they show status and the degree to which they are unplanned, they also differ in their degree "feminisation" and how closely they accord with the Western imagination of a "feminised" Oriental boudoir, and this directly affected the extent to which each of the two portrait photographs circulated in the Western mass media. In the group portrait (Figure **2**). Cixi is seated in the centre holding a mirror in one hand and straightening a hair ornament with the other; the other women are stood to either side. The eunuch Cui Yugui is seen in profile standing behind Cixi's chair. The photograph was probably taken just before another example in which Cixi has finished dressing and is now standing in the centre of the group. The Paiyun (排雲Dispelling Clouds) Hall at the Summer Palace was a complex of buildings constructed especially for Cixi in celebration of one of her birthdays. The name of the hall is a reference to one of Guo Pu's "wandering as an immortal" poems, suggesting this is the abode of an immortal and offering auspicious congratulations and wishes for long life to Cixi on her birthday, and indeed during the initial stages of its design Cixi did at one point intend to make the Paiyun Hall her residence [40]. The Paiyun Hall complex faces south, its three-courtyard layout mirroring the architecture of the "outer courts" of the Forbidden City. In the series of photographs described above, the Paiyun Hall overlooks the expanse of Kunming Lake, with Longevity Hill (*wanshou shan* 萬壽山) and the Buddhist Incense Tower (*foxiang ge* 佛香閣) behind, an architectural layout that is a metaphor for "ascending to heaven step by step" [41]. In the photographs, the group stands in an open space akin to an "outer court" out front of the Paiyun Hall, a place where court officials would assemble to offer their good wishes during the celebrations around the empresses' birthday. In the light of this, scholars have noted that the "outer court" was traditionally a space for men only, with birthday celebrations for concubines and consorts taken place in the "inner court". Cixi is the first to break with this clear gender division regarding the use of palace space [42]. In the two photographs taken in front of the Paiyun Hall, Cixi is always at the centre of her court ladies, whether at toilette or not, and whether she is standing or sitting, everyone else is waiting respectfully in attendance on her, holding the same posture until Cixi finishes her toilette, a clear display of Cixi's authority as matriarch.

It could be said that in this group portrait of Cixi at toilette, the dowager empresses feminised and casual pose does not affect, indeed even highlights, her effortless hold on power, showing her not only as the centre of the traditionally male space of the "outer court" but using her status as a woman to confirm her absolute authority as female head of household. In this sense, the traditional feminised pose of a portrait dressing at the mirror has escaped or transcended the traditional gender context. This is apparent in another group photograph (Figure **13**); Cixi sits enthroned in the centre, her maids and ladies to either side; her cross-

legged posture was often associated with sexual enticement in traditional depictions of women but with Cixi here these traditional gender referents no longer apply and it becomes instead an indicator of the power she holds [43].

Figure 13: Group portrait of Cixi and her court ladies at the Hall of Joyful Longevity, Summer Palace, photograph, collection of Palace Museum, Beijing.

Compared to the group portraits, the "deliberately staging" of the femininity of her solo portrait dressing before a mirror (Figure **1**) is readily apparent. Firstly, Cixi's gaze looks away out of shot, which makes this photograph seem staged, rather than a casual moment captured as the group photograph appears. Second, Cixi appears to be within a more private interior space, even though it is most likely in fact a set deliberately created in front of her private chambers in the Hall of Joyful Longevity(*leshou tang* 樂壽堂) at the Summer Palace; this makes the photograph seem to be of the sort of private interior space a woman should occupy rather than the public space seen in the group photo. Lastly, in the solo portrait, besides holding a dressing mirror, Cixi also has an ornament held as if she is about to put it in her hair, this display of specifically female hair ornamentation does not appear in the group photograph. There are currently more than ten examples of photographs in this staging still extant, and although in them Cixi's costume and hair ornamentation varies, there are no obvious changes to her seat, the screen, the painted backdrop of bamboo groves behind the screen and the sixteen-character label on the screen announcing Cixi's exalted status. As well as dating these photographs to 1904, the label also makes a particular announcement of Cixi's status as "The current Holy Mother Empress Dowager of Great Qing," probably related to the use of these photographs as diplomatic gifts. Carlos Rojas points out that there is a triple gaze at work in these photographs, first the specular gaze when Cixi looks at the finished photograph, then the photographic gaze as the photographer takes the picture and last of all the gaze of Princess Der Ling, Western-educated and thus representing the Western perspective, looking out from behind the painted screen in the centre of the photograph. It is a gaze that reveals the metaphorical intersection of East and West and of tradition and modernity implicit in these photographs of Cixi at toilette [44].

Rojas's triple gaze analysis in fact touches on the dissemination, display and audience of these photographs. The solo portrait of Cixi dressing at her mirror was far more popular with the Western media than the group photographs, not only appearing widely in English-language press and publications (Figure **14**) [45] but also printed and sold as a postcard, even making its way back to appear on sale in China in the early years of the 20th century (Figure **15**) [46]. In the early years of the 20th century, before photographs of Cixi were made public, the Western media had portrayed her with the image of an oriental beauty in her boudoir (Figure **16**) [47], based in fact on a print of a two-century old painting of a court beauty by the mid-Qing court painter Leng Mei, titled "Girl tired from reading in spring boudoir (*Chun gui juan du tu* 春閨倦讀圖)"; the pose of the figure with hand to cheek, fixed gaze and crossed legs are all signs conveying

Figure 14: "The Catherine De' Medici of China", Illustrated London News, issue 3631, November 21, 1908.

hints of sexuality for the appreciation of a male audience. In the years around the Boxer Rebellion (1900 CE) Cixi was generally portrayed in the Western media with an old, ugly and wicked image. In the early years of the 20th century, Cixi made efforts to disseminate her portrait in photographs and oil paintings as part of her diplomatic endeavours, and especially in the case of the oil painting, deliberately asked that she be portrayed as more youthful and beautiful so as to reverse her international image as a "wicked old crone". Against this background, the delight the Western media took in this "feminised" photograph of Cixi was a reflection of the feminised other of an oriental harem in the Western imagination, not what was intended but perhaps inevitable and overlapping with the image of a ruler of China with feminine charm displayed in the late Qing portraiture of Cixi.

Figure 15: "The Late Dowager Empress of China", postcard sent from Etaples in France to Hankou, June 12 1912.

During the 19th century as Britain expanded colonies, a continuous stream of portraits of Queen Victoria reigning over all and conquering the races of the world were being produced in photograph and painting form and copied in vast quantities. Not only did Cixi keep portraits of Victoria, she also showed signs of wanting to copy the British queen [48]. It is in such a context that in the period of reformed Qing rule in the early years of the 20th century, as international diplomatic contacts grew ever more close and with a view to reversing the ugly image of China's rulers portrayed in the international media, Cixi did away with the taboo on the public display of portraits of China's rulers that had been in place for close on a millennium,

Figure 16: The Empress Dowager of China, illustration in Arthur H. Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*, 1894.

sending a portrait in oils of herself to go on show at the World's Fair in America and presenting photographs as diplomatic gifts to foreign leaders and their spouses. We can see visual resemblances between the photographic portraits of Cixi and Victoria – in the way their gaze does not meet the eye of the viewer, or how one shoe is visible under the hem of their skirt – and these have been seen as evidence of the influence the model of portraits of Victoria had on Cixi [49]. These portraits were popular with the Western media, particularly the one where Cixi adjusts her hair ornaments before the mirror, and were given wide circulation. An analysis of the "feminised" characteristics of these portraits reveals not only the different strategies behind their making and subjective identities in early and later periods, it also shows how in the process of their dissemination they became more strongly feminised (or even depoliticised) due to the imagined oriental ruler in the minds of Western audiences. In this sense, the all-powerful aged matriarchal figure transcending gender that Cixi played for domestic audiences, with even ambitions of emulating Victoria on whose empire the sun never set, was a failure in the context of the so-called prevailing international readings, guided by Western visual ideas.

CONCLUSION

As a survey of portraiture of a late Qing empress across the latter half of the 19th century and early years of the 20th, this paper reveals different strategies at

work in their creation, with the changing gender symbols that appear in them a potential clue to their interpretation. To sum up the preceding, different "gender performances" are apparent in the late Qing empress Cixi's portraiture, from the masculinised portraits at leisure of the early period through those dressed as Guanyin, a cross-gender deity controlling the spiritual realm, and on to the feminised portrait of the late period designed for diplomacy and to project an image on the international stage, and these gender performances are intimately linked to different political aspirations and shifting socio-historical contexts. However, as Judith Butler has pointed out, there is no simple binary between sex and gender. Moreover, "… There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" [50]. In this sense, Cixi's portraits have no "true" gender and also present no "true" gender.

Furthermore, by looking back over portraits of a late Qing empress created and displayed in specific historical contexts at different periods, this paper also sought to explore how different gender symbols have been employed at different points in history by the rulers of China's last dynasty a hundred years and more ago, at a time of cultural collision between West and East. Although an attempt was made to manipulate image as a means of consolidating ultimate power, in a broader international context stripped of native meanings it ultimately created the reverse effect and verged on failure. We can say that China's projection of image abroad as represented by the portraiture of Cixi had its beginnings in the complex international context of the early 20th century but failed in the mutual incompatibility of Eastern and Western visual cultures and the contexts in which images were read. Such a conflict between different visual cultures is still waiting for us to further interpret and integrate.

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[7] Cheng-hua Wang, op. cit., p.248.

[8] The official title of the painting in the Palace Collection is "The Emperor and Empress Playing Chess" but when we consider the various status-marking elements in the picture it seems unlikely that the man portrayed is the Xianfeng Emperor. Current scholarly guesses as to the identity of the male figure include the Tongzhi Emperor, Li Lianying or some other palace eunuch. Cheng-hua Wang, op. cit., p.249-51. Lin Jing. Appreciation and analysis of portrayal of Cixi playing chess(Cixi duiyi tu shang xi). Forbidden City Oct 5 1988; 48:18. Xu Che. Pictorial commentary on Cixi(*Cixi hua zhuan*). Shanghai Science Press 2006; p.222.

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[11] In terms of facial appearance "Portrait of Cixi in Buddhist Costume" resembles a vertical scroll in the Palace Museum collection, "Portrait of Cixi Dressed as Guanyin." Given that the latter was commissioned in celebration of Cixi's seventieth birthday, it can be surmised that the former was probably painted in the latter years of Cixi's rule.

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[17] Ibid. p.17.

[18] Feng Huang speculates that when they wear *kasaya* the two eunuchs are playing the role of the Sudhana, the Child of Wealth and the Dragon Girl, Guanyin's traditional attendants, while Lin Jing and others take the view that Li Lianying is playing the part of Sudhana. He has his hands pressed together in a gesture

Sudhana is commonly shown using, though there are no examples of Sudhana being portrayed wearing a *kasaya*. Li Yuhang also noted that in earlier visual representations although sometimes Guanyin appears in the company of the Sixteen Arhats there are no images where her attendants are two monks. Li Yuhang, op. cit., 2012, p.107. Feng Huang. Cixi dressing up as Guanyin(*Cixi banyan Guanyin*). Forbidden City 1980; 4: 35. Lin Jing. Photographs of Cixi in the Palace Museum Collection(*Gugong cang Cixi zhaopian*). Beijing: Forbidden City Press 2001; p.36. Liu Beisi, Xu Qixian, Eds. Collected portrait photographs from the National Palace Museum collection(*Gugong zhencang renwu zhaopian huicui*). Beijing: Forbidden City Press 1994; p.44.

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[20] We have no examples from the Buddhist canon of Avalokitesvara appearing with both male and female attendants. Research by Chün-fang Yü suggests their later appearance came after the Tang, influenced by the Golden Boy and Jade Girl shown in attendance on the Jade Emperor, and embodiment of the Daoist *yin-yang* principle. Chün-fang Yü, op. cit., p.439.

[21] "Kuan-yin would appear as male to save men and as female to save women." Chün-fang Yü, op. cit., p.474.

[22] Carlos Rojas, op. cit. 2008, 7-9.

[23] Ibid., p.10.

[24] Chün-fang Yü, op. cit., p.476.

[25] Ibid., pp.479-84.

[26] Ibid., p.15.

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[31] Zhu Jiajin, Ding Ruqin, op. cit., p.430-431.

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