Tangdai: A Biographical Sketch

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In the annals of Qing painting, Tangdai warrants more than a passing note.[1] True, he is not the most significant of the Qing painters and has never been considered as such. A disciple of Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715), Tangdai carried the orthodox heritage into the inner court. In that context, he was influential not only for being in the right time and right place, but also for having molded the taste of the young prince Bao, the future Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795), who was by far the best known of imperial patrons and collectors in post-Song China. By that time, he was a venerable old Manchu, sufficiently close to the young prince, and through the example of painting as well as theoretical discourse, directed the latter toward what might be termed the catholic taste of that age. The closeness of their association is affirmed in Qianlong's own words:

> I love Master Tang's paintings,
> Having requested many but not feeling satiated.
> Recently, a piece of
> The 'Cleansing Heart' paper of old
> Was brought in from the market.
> In a quiet room, amidst a small gathering
> He painted for me a landscape....[2]

In another occasion, the young prince wrote, referring to a landscape that Tangdai had painted for him:

> Facing the stream with back to the hills,
> A hermit plays the *qin*.
> The limpid melody cuts across
> The boundless space.
> None but this elegant painter can,
> With his elegant brush,
> Portray the scene
> And stir a friend's soul.[3]

Noted for his longevity, this Manchu artist served under three emperors and made his last, and most memorable contribution under Qianlong.[4] In quantity and in scale, in individual works as well as in collaborative ventures – with such notable court artists as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), Sun Hu, Shen Yuan, Ding Guanpeng, and Zhou Kun – the aging master experienced a surge of productivity during his last decades.

However, as a painter and a theorist, Tangdai had displayed a measure of maturity even before the Kangxi reign (1662-1722) came to an end. Imperial patronage of his painting began with the Kangxi emperor, who bestowed on him the unofficial title, *hua zhuangyuan* ('champion among painters'), rising to a peak under the Qianlong. By virtue of his position in the court, his works naturally were known to such noblemen as Hongjiao (d. 1764) and Yueduan (1671-1704), and to such officials and literati as Chen Yixi (1648-1709), Chen Pengnian (1664-1723), Jiang Tingxi (1669-1732), and later, Zhang Tingyu (1672-1755). His *Huishi Fawei* ('On the Secret of Painting'), having undergone a number of revisions, appeared in 1717.[5] Containing decades of observations on the art of painting, it emerged as a full blown treatise, harking back to such noble antecedents as Guo Xi's and Han Zhuo's texts.[6] Shen Zongjin (1669-1735), in his preface to *Huishi Fawei*, praised its author's ability to harbor the essences of Jing [Hao], Guan [Tong], Dong [Yuan] and Ju[ran], and to combine the past with the present.[7] In comparison, Wang Yuanqi's *Yuchuang Manbi* ('Random Notes by the side of Rain-streaked Window') is little more than what its title implies, 'random notes'.[8] If Wang Yuanqi only hints, Tangdai makes ideas concrete. If the former merely states, the latter elaborates and renders the concept not only clear but systematic. By all account, it is a treatise of grand design, as comprehensive as it is persuasive – an exceptional feat for any eighteenth-century theorist, whether Manchu or Chinese.[9]

In view of Tangdai's role as a painter in the court and his unquestionable accomplishment in the realm of art theory, Tangdai's life ought to be better known. Curiously, biographical records are scanty. As Roger Goepper found in his pioneering study,[10] the available biographies tend to be laconic and redundant. Zhang Geng (1685-1760), in his *Guochao Huazheng Xulu*, presented a typically brief sketch:

> Tangdai, *zi* Jingyan, is a Manchu. He served in the capacity of Supervisor-in-chief in the Imperial Household Department. Skilled in landscape, his brush is penetrating and resonant, and his composition is noted to be stable and balanced. In this sense, he harked back to the Song masters and may be regarded as a painter of the 'competent' class. Attending the inner court, the

> present emperor [Qianlong] appreciated his works, which in turn received imperial approbations and inscriptions.[11]

Even as erudite a scholar as Hu Jing (1769-1845) treats the artist with no greater detail. His biography is not so different from Zhang Geng's, and may even be partially derivative. Hu Jing, however, was privileged to have seen Tangdai's paintings in the Qing Palace collection to an extent not possible for his precursor. He was more knowledgeable about imperial inscriptions on the Manchu artist's works beyond the scope of the *Leshantang Ji*, with which Zhang Geng was familiar. Hu wrote:

> Your servant Jing respectfully submitted: Tangdai received patronage from two emperors [Kangxi and Qianlong]. In landscape, he followed the Song masters. When he was young, his fame stirred interest among officials and noblemen. As he entered the inner court, and received imperial instructions, his brushwork improved tremendously. His paintings are rarely seen among collections [outside of the Palace]; exceptions were cherished as precious jade.[12]

These standard references, then, provide little relief to Tangdai's biographical profile.

A few more helpful insights come from *Duhua Jilue* ('A Brief Biographical Survey of [Qing] Painters'), which states:

> Tangdai's *zi* is Yudong, and he is of the Blue Banner. For an extended period, he worked among the clerical staff in the service of Master Honglan, and thereby became acquainted with scholars of Southeast China. Pursuing a career in painting, he became a painter-in-attendance in the inner court, and shared fame with imperial clansman, Liuquan. Thus they came to be known as the Eastern Tang and Western Liu. By the time Tangdai changed his affiliation to the House of Ning, he was well over 70. However, he remained no less devoted to the art of painting. In style he modelled himself after Dong [Yuan] and Ju[ran]. His early works may lack in strength, but are known for a sense of clarity and balance. In official capacity, he attained the post of commandant.[13]

Master Honglan is the sobriquet of the imperial clansman, Yueduan (formerly known as Yunduan), son of Yuelo (Yolo, 1625-1689), the Prince of Anhe. An accomplished poet and literatus, as well as an amateur painter of, most likely, floral subjects in the manner of Chen Shun (1483-1544), Yueduan's fortune flowed and ebbed.[14] In the 23rd year of Kangxi (1684), he was given the princely rank of Qin, but six years later (29th year of Kangxi, 1690), was demoted to *beizi* (of the fourth degree).[15]

A further demotion came when, in the 37th year of Kangxi (1698), under dubious circumstances, he was stripped of all rank.[16] Liuquan was the sobriquet for another Manchu, Muxi, of the princely lineage of Jian, who was, like Tangdai, a disciple of Wang Yuanqi. The two artists of equal stature came to be called 'Eastern Tang and Western Liu' since 'they resided in opposite directions in the city'.[17] As to Tangdai's change of fealty to the House of Ning in his seventies, the circumstances are unknown, although it most likely relates to the downfall of Yunduan, even though it came about years later. As a hereditary *canling* or commandant within the Eight Banners, Tangdai would have fallen under the jurisdiction of a princely house, and a transfer from one to another was not out of the question.

In all likelihood, the House of Ning referred to above was that of 'Ning Junwang' (*junwang* was a prince of the second degree). Hongjiao, who was given the title in 1730, was the fourth son of Hongxiao (d. 1778), a noted bibliophile of Mingshan Tang fame.[18] Since this change of jurisdiction came about when Tangdai was in his seventies, it took place under Hongjiao in the early part of the Qianlong reign. Strength of evidence dates Tangdai's birth to 1673.[19] From that, we may arrive at the conclusion that he changed his allegiance after 1743, when he reached 70 years of age, and before 1753, when he became an octogenarian.

How do we square this with the fact that, during an extended portion of these years, Master Tangdai was also active in the inner court, serving as the Supervisor-in-chief in the Imperial Household Department and painting away in his role as a court master as well as collaborating with other artists? Could it be that, with a decline in health after 1746[20] or thereabouts, he was absolved from further participation in projects requiring considerable energy and physical endurance? Could it be that the transfer also took place around that time?

The archival sources in Beijing pertaining to the daily operation of the Imperial Household Department under the Qianlong reign, may reveal the answers in a future investigation. However, it may be useful to note that the above picture, while admittedly brief and sketchy, is not contradicted in the writings of Tangdai's close friends like Chen Pengnian and Shen Zongjing, or those of the artist himself. Both Chen and Shen contributed prefaces to the *Huishi Fawei*.[21] Both also mentioned Tangdai's Changbai heritage, and his hereditary rank of *raoqi canling*. In addition, Shen Zongjing testified that he had seen a copy of a genealogical compilation of Tangdai's ancestry, entitled *Tangshi Jiacheng*. From that, he concluded that one of Tangdai's progenitors had received the prestigious

title, likely posthumous, of Guanglu Gong, having distinguished himself in early Qing military campaigns for bravery and for his self-sacrifice.[22] Another took part in quelling the rebellions of the Three Feudatories and, while stationed in Hanzhong (that is, Southern Shenxi and NW Hubei, with Nanzheng as its administrative seat), made a staunch stand against great odds, thereby, he contended, saving the country from potential ruin. Shen went on to describe Tangdai as emaciated in appearance, stammering in speech, and, confirming the testimonial of one of the master's seals, fond of wine and, while tipsy, painting without the slightest inhibition.[23]

So much for the Manchu painter and theoretician who, in addition, was not known for ability to manage his own financial affairs. One source suggests that he turned management of the family estate over to his brother.[24] Another relates his gradual decline in circumstance in later years in spite of the presence of imperial favors.[25]

Tangdai's own preface to the art treatise also provides several intimate details to the profile thus established.[26] Accentuating his early interest in painting, Tangdai recounted his erstwhile desire for advancement through the civil examination system, and his failures therein on two occasions. Subsequent assumption, or inheritance – based on the successes of his recent ancestors – of a military career did not bring about much consolation, even though he partook in arduous campaigns beyond the border and travelled 'tens of thousands of miles'.[27] It was after these tumultuous years that Tangdai turned his sole attention to painting, and by 1717, when the treatise took definite shape, he had already devoted himself to this art for more than thirty years.

While the above have been established as the general aspects of Tangdai's life, few other details are forthcoming. For a painter who lived only two centuries ago, he remains disturbingly elusive. A primary obstacle in the biographic quest is presented by the question of his Manchu heritage. The title of his genealogy, *Tangshi Jiacheng*, seems to strike a discordant note. On the surface, 'Tangshi' appears to suggest that the family, or the clan, had adopted a Chinese name, or stemmed from a Chinese origin. However, Tangdai proudly proclaimed for himself a Jurchen heritage in his seal, 'Of the Old Tanggua clan'.[28]

Tanggua is recorded as a surname during the Jin dynasty, and some of the bearers were notable personages.[29] Searching through *Baqi Manzhou*

Shizhu Tongpu ('A Comprehensive Genealogical Survey of the Manchu in the Eight Banners'), however, including as well names of those of Mongolian, Han and Korean descent, we found no mention of Tanggua at all, though there appear such similar names as Tangda, Tangni, Tangjia and Tangguer.[30] It appears that, by the time of the Qing dynasty, the Jurchen name of Tanggua had fallen into disuse.[31] Tangdai is nowhere listed under the above-mentioned clans, nor does he appear under the Tang clans of Chinese ancestry.

By chance this author came across, in *juan* 11 of the above mentioned geneology, under the broad umbrella of the Tatala clan, an individual entry on Bada Bayan, which reads:[32]

> [Bada Bayan] is of the Blue Banner... Native of the Zhakumu region, he came to accept fealty [to the Qing]. His great grandson Laohan attacked Fushun from Xianshan; and was the first to reach the sieged city. Afterwards, he [led the troop] to Yizhou and died during that campaign. Given posthumously the title of *qiduwei*, it was inherited by his son, Shalaqi; through imperial munificence, the latter was given an added rank of *yunqiwei*. [When Shalaqi] died, his son, Shaxi, inherited the title, though his original appointment was of *bujun fuwei*. [When Shaxi] died, his son Tangdai inherited the title, with however the added rank taken away; at the present, his title is that of *qiduwei*.

Thus suddenly appears the name Tangdai, which, as a given name, is rare even among the Manchu. As proposed here, the genealogy of this Tangdai, inasmuch as his progenitors are concerned, dovetails in essence with that supplied by Shen Zongjing. In particular, Laohan, the great grandson of Bada Bayan and the great grandfather of this Tangdai, fits in nicely, as he died for the Qing cause after having led the attack on Yizhou as the 'first to climb up the city wall'. In *Daqing Yitong Zhi* ('The Records of the Unified Realm of the Great Qing'), *juan* 41, for instance, Laohan is depicted as a battle-hardened warrior who spent roughly 14 years in the military rank, took part in some fifty battles, and was successful in laying siege to a good number of enemy cities.[33] And *Qinding Baqi Tongzhi* ('A Compendium on the Eight Banners in the Qing Dynasty Commissioned by the Emperor'), *juan* 209, like the above-mentioned titles, concurs in underscoring Laohan's participation in the attacks on Fushun and Yizhou, the two historic battles during the early years.[34] In the former, the founder of the Qing, Nurhaci (or. Emperor Taizu, 1559-1626), having announced his Seven Grievances against Ming China, launched a full military campaign.[35] In the latter, Abahai (or Emperor Taizong, 1592-1643) sought to subdue Korea shortly after his own ascension to the throne:

> During the reign of Tianming, [Laohan] participated in the Great Army's attack on Fushun. He was the first to climb up the city wall and took it. In the first year of Tiancong (1627), he was among the retinue of the Great *Beile*, Jierhalang and Amin, in the campaign against Korea. When laying siege in Yizhou, [Laohan] attempted a night attack and died.[36]

More specific on his death is a passage in *Daqing Yitong Zhi*:

> In the first year of Tiancong, [the Qing army] laid siege of Yizhou but was unable to conquer it. As the night cloud darkened over the sky, and silence reigned over the city, Laohan quietly moved toward the city wall. Just as he was about to climb upward, suddenly the arrows descended like rain, and he was mortally wounded.[37]

Against Laohan's extraordinary deeds, the careers of Shalaqi and Shaxi were apparently devoid of such heroic endeavors or perhaps were simply less well documented. Shen Zongjing's words suggest that one of the two protected the imperial realm by valiantly guarding the strategic Hanzhong region during the rebellion of the Three Feudatories, which raged between 1673 and 1681.

A chart in *Qinding Baqi Tongzhi*, lists six generations of descendants of Laohan who inherited the title of *qiduwei*:[38]

1. Shalaqi, who, in addition to the hereditary title, was also given the added rank of *yunqiwei*.
2. Shaxi, the son of Shalaqi, inherited the titles in the 7th year of Shunzhi (1650).
3. Tangdai, son of Shaxi, was stripped of the added rank, though retained the title of *qiduwei*; this took place in the 55th year of Kangxi (1716).
4. Songling, grandson of Tangdai, inherited the title in the 19th year of Qianlong (1754).
5. Balang'a, Songling's uncle, inherited the title in 43rd year of Qianlong (1778).
6. Kemen'e, son of Balang'a, received the inherited title in the 51st year of Qianlong (1786).

Given the chronology shown in the chart, we can deduce that only Shaxi, upon becoming the rightful heir to Shalaqi in 1650, could have been the martial hero stationed in Hanzhong during the rebellion of the Three Feudatories. In addition, since most of the hereditary titles were quickly filled by the rightful heir at the death of the original holder, this chart also supplies us with a likely date for Tangdai's death, that is, 1754. At that time, he would have been 82 *sui*.

Is this Tangdai the same as our Tangdai, the painter and theorist? Given that Zhakumu was located in the Changbai region, then is it at all possible to equate Tatala with the old Jurchen name of Tanggua, or the Chinese Tang for that matter?[39] Although these accounts of Laohan's martial bravery are close to that of our master's progenitor in Shen Zongjing's narrative, this in itself cannot be considered as sufficient proof. Similar, celebrated feats could have been accomplished by a score of those who sacrificed their lives in the founding of the Qing empire. More specific evidence is needed.

In *Qinding Baqi Tongzhi*, a chapter is devoted to the question of *shizhu* ('clans and families').[40] Reflecting the viewpoint of the Manchu ruler, its author(s) sought to discredit the practice, purportedly initiated by Tao Zongyi of the Yuan dynasty in his famous *Zhegeng Lu*, of establishing equivalence between the Jurchen surnames and Chinese ones,[41] for instance, Wanyan as Wang, Gulijia (Guaerjia) as Wang, Nuxilie (Niugulu) as Lang, or Shimo as Xiao. In addition, among the equivalent name pairings which were a popular extension of Tao's practice and which were deemed to be even less defensible, was the equation of Tatala and Tang![42]

However justifiable in the official sense, the attack by the author(s) of *Qinding Baqi Tongzhi* against this practice only highlights its persistence during as well as before the Qianlong era. Were it something found only among the Chinese population, hoping to derive a measure of social prestige through adoption of Manchu or Jin equivalents of Chinese names, then it would not have been so critical. However, when it was the Manchu overlords who were doing that, then the matter deserved close official scrutiny.

The official line, such as exemplified in *Qinding Baqi Tongzhi*, intended of course to preserve the purity of the Manchu heritage and lineage and to discourage genealogical tampering. To that extent, infusion from Chinese sources and names would be not only confusing but contrary to the dynastic interest. Although the court publicly sought to retain Manchu purity, in private, even an upstanding Manchu like Tangdai, whose hereditary rank gave him distinction in and outside of the court, could exhibit a strong sinophilic tendency in employing the Tang-Tatala link. The fact that his own given name, Tangdai, also incorporated the same character Tang, and thus could be redundant, did not disturb him in the least. It was but an accepted trend.[43]

Viewed against the above, the title of the Tangdai genealogical chart, *Tangshi Jiacheng*, becomes intelligible. Tatala is Tang, and Tangdai,

though a given name, is made to sound sinicized and less Manchu. That he willingly displayed the compilation to his Chinese companion, Shen Zongjing, was an indication of the depth and extent of his family pride.

Tangdai's life now emerges with increasing clarity. The play on his name was but one small aspect of his life-long sinophilic tendencies. When viewed in conjunction with his unfulfilled quest for a scholarly-official career and his persistent, passionate involvement in the pursuit of the art of painting and its theoretical implications, Tangdai exhibited an amazing spectrum of those telling symptoms of a cultivated Manchu of his time who strove to turn away from his own martial heritage. While Tangdai's sinicization may not be startling, its extent is remarkable, serving to mark the rapid pace of that historic process, against which even imperial policy and pronouncement proved largely ineffective.[44]