

# What Happened? One Woman with Two Faces

范定甫 *Ting-fu Fan*, 林怡瓊 *Yi-chiung Lin*  
三間 San Jian Art & Conservation, Taiwan



This is a conservation case study of an ancestor portrait collected by National Taiwan Museum. National Taiwan Museum was established in 1908, construction of the Museum's new home was completed in 1915, it was one of the most noteworthy public buildings built by the Japanese colonial government, also is the oldest museum in Taiwan. The museum explores the indigenous natural history and biodiversity of Taiwan. They have many valuable Ching (1664-1911) dynasty's Chinese painting, calligraphy and ancestor portraits in hand scrolls and hanging scrolls.



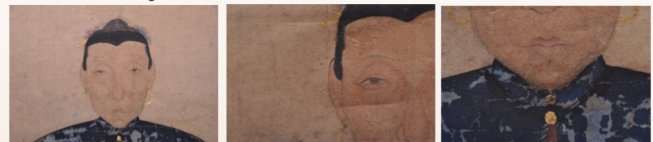
## Introduction

Most of the Chinese ancestor portraits were painted on paper or silk with precious mineral pigments such as lapis lazuli, azurite, mineral green, or cinnabar in animal glue. The costume is often depicted luxury color with beautiful patterns to reveal the rank of the deceased.

In this case, one of the museum ancestor portrait collection was brought out. This painting was a heavy colored painting painted on paper and mounted with silk borders in the tradition Chinese hanging scroll. The portrait painted a couple seated on wooden chairs. The figure is on the horizontal center of the painting with no other graphics in the background. Both husband and wife were wearing indigo color winter fur coat clothing. To distinguish from their plane costume, it was supposed to be the most gorgeous clothes of the deceased before their lives. Therefore, in general ancestor portrait painting styles, we supposed the master a general government officer or civilian.

A known conservation case study about ancestor portrait paintings was presented in AIC journal: "The Treatment of Chinese Portraits: An Introduction to Chinese Painting Conservation Technique."

However, ancestor portrait like this piece not only reveal their peaceful marriage and level of living but also shown admire and memorial by their later generations. Comparing with other fancy gorgeous paintings, this painting was in fact ordinary and simple. However, it draws curators' attention. It is because that the mistress's face was a cutout and pasted down onto the painting. We wondered, why? And is there anything underneath the face? This paste method was considered rare in traditional mounting technique. In general, most mounters would cut the wrong or the unwanted part off, then inlay the new painting or pattern, in this case the new face. This face brought out many discussions, considerations and imaginations to us.



## Examination and Main Issues

After closed documentation and examination, including damage condition information, we furthermore adapt optical investigation on the face, such as transparent light and infrared ray. Unfortunately, there was no clear result to reveal the secret story underneath the face. Only we can see that the face area is not even under transparent light.

After discussion with curators, the museum wishes to understand more to study this painting. Therefore, curators decided to remove the surface face. With this decision made, we need to consider many serious situations we might run into during the entire process of treatment: Is it safe to remove the face without damaging itself and the ground paper? How would different paper fiber changes and interacts while it is wet? What should we do if we find anything underneath? Is it possible to reattach the face while it is necessary? Can we reattach it back in the exactly same place?

With all these questions and considerations, we prepared and provided several treatment methods, to make sure even if there are new changes during treatments, we can still safely proceed the process.



## Conservation Treatments

The museum approved our documentation results and treatment plans. We started the conservation treatment with surface cleaning by using soft goat hair brush and eraser powder. Then a low concentration photographic galantamine solution was used in ultrasonic wave to consolidate weak and flaking pigments for several times. To consolidate heavy colored area, we use brush directly until the pigments are absolute fixed. The old silk borders were cut off to make the piece smaller for the benefit of the following works. Then we proceed detailed surface cleaning again and decrease types of stains.

After temporary facing the colored areas and the entire painting surface, we started to remove the backing paper. Sprinkled and brushed with water to wet the backing paper gradually, the backing paper was peeled away layer by layer. After two layers of backing paper were removed, we see an indistinct face in the mistress's face area, on the other side of the ground paper.

We stopped right away, and adjusted our treatment to one of our expected results of discovering a face. A prepared lining paper was applied now, and with an addition protecting paper, we turn over the painting facing up, and then proceed the "faceoff" procedure. Tested several times, we eventually safely remove the surface face entirely without any damage. The underneath mysterious face now appeared to us. It was a comparatively tender and benevolent face, hasn't apply color in the hair. This is an unfinished face.

### Another face! Who are the Faces?

An unseen and different looking face! This result makes our conservation team and the curators excited, but disturbed. We discussed many possible reasons, and compared two faces to see if they are perhaps the same person. We wondered why the painter painted the face twice, and present it like this way? Who are the two faces? With all these questions, how we are going to with this unseen face?

### Adhesive Testing

We found that there is something feels like dirt that spread unevenly on the underneath face. Even it is bumpy and uneven, the surface face was still pasted down well entirely. After testing the unknown matter, we believed it is possibly a combination of traditional flour adhesive and protein glue. After discussion, it was decided to keep it in the way it was, without unnecessary physical removals for future investigation.

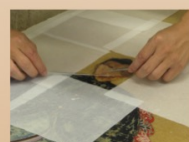
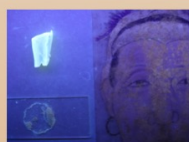
After complete the treatments, the surface face which we worried, was pasted back precisely on the same place with confirmation. The painting was then remounted in Chinese hanging scroll.

### Discussion

Since this painting was acquired from an antique dealer, it increases difficulties for curators to study on it and unable to provide further historical information. Chinese Physiognomy has no common conclusion in discussion how to distinguish two faces the same person. Traditional ancestor portrait painting has rare case study on covering and repaint the figure. Moreover, it is conflict in Chinese traditional etiquette to cover a face on an especially unfinished face. Reattach a face is violate to tradition Chinese custom, perhaps there was a stronger reason and purpose behind this painting.

All the mysteries and questions came out with no confident results after several months. Due to the practical project executive requirements, curators decided to paste back the face onto its original position and complete the conservation treatments and remounting.

This project is stopped for now, and the painting is in fine condition, but the kindly faced old woman underneath is still in our minds. We are still looking for finding similar conservation case study in tradition Chinese ancestor portrait paintings like this one, and hope to have new answers.



NOTE: In addition to worship ancestral tablets, ancestor portrait hanging scrolls are hang in the hall for later generations to remember. Ancestor portraits are usually painted according to the description of deceased facial characters from their posterity, or painted by painters by the general features until the family satisfied with the looking. Many ancestor portraits dressed in the government robes. Some were actually a government officer which was considered a highly society rank back in the time, but some were wish to glory their family to paint the deceased an officer custom.

Bibliography: Xiangmei Gu, Yuan-li Hou, and Valerie Gouet, *The American Institute for Conservation END BPG volume*, 1999.

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