

On Controversy of Shen Baozhen Portrait: In Search of the True Face of an Ancestor

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ABSTRACT

In *Six Observations upon Reading Notes on Modern Chinese Naval History* (2008), Emeritus Professor Y. W. Ma of the University of Hawaii casts his doubts on the famous portrait of Shen Baozhen (also known as Shen, Paochen). The subject of the customary portrait, sitting sideways in full regalia, is not Shen, Ma argues, but a “Third-Ranking General Hsü Jun-chih.” The real Shen is found in another painting titled *Portrait of the Elder Wenshu, Shen Baozhen*. The present study challenges Professor Ma’s findings via a careful examination of some major existing portraits of Shen.

It turns out that Ma’s so-called ‘real’ Shen portrait, currently housed in the Zheng Cheng-Gong Museum in Tainan, Taiwan, is actually a more recent creation, and is not a true copy of the real Shen. The controversial portrait showing Shen sitting sideways first appeared in *The Far East: A Monthly Journal* (1876) and later in *L’île Formose: Histoire et description* (1885). This study examines the historical background of both editions and concludes that the *Far East* portrait was inadvertently labeled *Portrait of Third-Ranking General Hsü Jun-chih*. The *L’île Formose* portrait was endorsed by sinologists Henri Cordier and Camille Imbault-Huart, and was supported by archived materials of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and an early photograph of Shen’s fourth son. Hence the *L’île Formose* portrait is the undisputed portrait of the real Shen. The portrait was taken by British photographer William T. Saunders.

The present study also examines the provenance of *Portraits of Meritorious Statesmen in the Tower of Violet Light* (National Palace Museum, Taipei), an album commissioned by Empress Dowager Cixi in 1886. Another Shen portrait from the *Petite Portraits of Meritorious Statesmen in the Tower of Violet Light* was found to be the work of Wu Youru, famous artist and illustrator of the *Tian-shi-zhai Pictorial*. Both portraits were created posthumously and therefore not a truthful rendition of the historical Shen, despite their imperial status.

Keywords: Shen Baozhen (Shen, Paochen), Portrait, *The Far East: A Monthly Journal*, *L'île Formose: Histoire et description*, *Portraits of Meritorious Statesmen in the Tower of Violet Light*