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An ulcerated squamous cell carcinoma of the forehead in the artistic heritage of Lam qua

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Lam Qua (1801–1860) was a Chinese painter from the Canton province, specialized in Western-style portraits, and the first Chinese portraitist to be exhibited in the West. From 1836 to 1855, Lam Qua painted a series of medical portraits of patients under treatment with *Peter Parker (1804–1888)*, a Yale University-trained missionary and physician, who founded the first Western-style hospital in China [1].

Doctor Parker commissioned Lam Qua to paint pre-operative portraits of patients who suffered from large tumors or other major deformities. His collection of at least 115 oil portraits of pathological conditions also includes an oil on canvas (1838) entitled *Le sanying*, or *Woman with tumor on her forehead (victim of malpractice)* (Fig. 1).

The painting illustrates case number 4849, which Parker also recorded: "Case of malpractice. June 1838. Le Sanying, aged 27 one year previous to her coming to the hospital had a tumor of the size of a hen's egg, upon the forehead. The Chinese as usual applied escharotics, by which it was converted into an ulcer of a bad character. The ulcerated tumor spread over a surface of three or four square inches. Another tumor had also attained the size of a small orange under the left ear, and a third had commenced over the temporal artery of the right side near its origin. The ulcer on the head was first cleansed by poultices, and afterwards adhesive straps and firm bandages were applied – tonics administered, and the whole assumed a healthy appearance. The tumor under the ear has been removed, and new skin has covered a considerable portion of the sore on the forehead. Had the tumor been left to itself by the native physician it might have been easily removed, and the young woman saved a great deal of suffering? Her case is still doubtful" [2].

The painting shows a young Chinese with an enlarging exophytic and fungating lesion with central ulceration and non-healing wound over the forehead region, probably ulcerating squamous cell carcinoma (SCC). The painting also illustrates an ovoid tumoral mass in the left retroauricular area, probably a secondary metastasis located in a left retroauricular lymph node. Indeed, regional lymph nodes are the most common site of SCC's metastasis [3].

Generally, Chinese people are fair-skinned, with skin phototypes III and IV [4]. Along with increased exposure to ultraviolet B rays from the sun, it creates a heightened risk for developing skin cancer [5,6]. On the other hand, SCC is the second most diagnosed type of skin cancer among the Chinese population [7]. In China, until Western hospitals were founded in the late nineteenth century, treatment was usually administered at the patient's home, and healing evolved around the patient's family [8]. Even though public institutions of healing existed in China since the Han dynasty and were founded and organized by the imperial court's medical department [8,9], the functions of these institutions were undefined and ambiguous, while family remained the primary place of healing [10]. Moreover, women were reluctant towards Western hospitals, which had difficulty in attracting female patients in the early nineteenth century [11]. This was, perhaps, one of the reasons why the female patient arrived so late at the hospital. This, together with the evolution of the malignant tumor makes us reconsider Parker's statement that it was a "cases of malpractice".

This artistic representation of an ulcerated SCC provides

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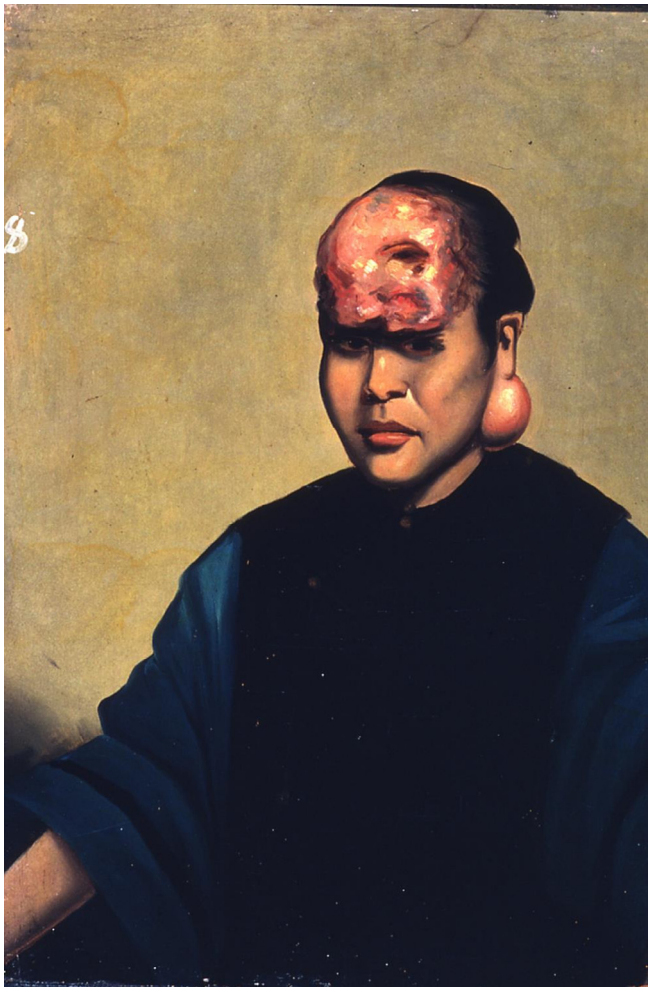

Fig. 1. Le Sanying, or Woman with tumor on her forehead (victim of malpractice) (1838), oil on canvas, Lam Qua (1801–1860). Courtesy, Yale University, Harvey Cushing/John Whitney Medical library.

information about the presence of skin cancers at the early 19th Century, and represents an interesting exercise of iconodiagnosis.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mehy.2019.109383.

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