

Audience and Spatialization of Landscape Reception at the Qing Court

**Philippe Foret,
University of Oklahoma,
USA**

Abstract

I would like to interpret the public response to political garden projects in late imperial China in order to contribute to the study of a universal topic: the interaction between the design of palace gardens and landscape experience. I am therefore proposing an extension of the concept of social reception by examining its spatial application to the designed landscape of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Qianlong emperor (1711- 1799) alternatively stated or suggested what the original reception of the landscape he designed should be. However the focus of my paper is on his audience as garden visitors rather than the emperor's intentions. Instead of solely examining Qianlong's poems and stelaes, I am turning to garden vistas and landscape literature in the gardens as privileged venues for the narration of landscape experience. Furthermore the designing and naming of Bishu shanzhuang, and the tension the imperial garden of Chengde created with the outside world may be discussed as if the implied readers were not only government officials, foreign diplomats, and monks who were contemporary participants in Qianlong's garden enterprise, but also the general public today. Of importance to me are the political messages Qianlong conveyed when he added to the legibility of garden scenery of Chengde by designing thirty-six vistas and building a series of Tibetan temples, and, more specifically, how these imperial messages were perceived, understood, and approved by the emperor's audience.

Imperial Garden Strategy

The most energetic and talented monarch of the Qing dynasty, the Qianlong (Gaozong) emperor reigned from the gardens of his capitals in Beijing and Chengde between 1736 and 1795. His empire was the largest, most populous, and wealthiest in the history of Asia. While carefully establishing an outstanding record as a prolific poet, a vigilant censor, a Confucian ruler, and the pacifier of Inner Asia, Qianlong also sought to be a Taoist esthete, an accomplished garden architect, and a bodhisattva¹.

¹ A series of portraits was made of Qianlong dressed as Manjusri, the chief disciple of the Buddha,

This paper will examine how Qianlong's gardens lent support to his many identity claims, and how these claims were received by garden visitors around 1780 (when the architectural projects in Chengde were completed) and today. Qianlong's gardens of Yuanming yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness) in Beijing and Bishu shanzhuang (Mountain Hamlet to Flee Summer Heat) in Chengde formed the ostentatiously unornamented settings that the emperor conceived and used for state receptions. Both imperial gardens became known to European architecture historians and landscape designers through a letter of Brother Jean Denis Attiret mailed from Beijing in 1743 and several accounts of the Lord Macartney embassy that traveled to Chengde in 1793. The two gardens have met entirely opposite fates. Burnt by the France-English expedition of 1860, Yuanming yuan is now a poorly maintained public park in the high-tech Beijing suburb of Haidian, while restored Bishu shanzhuang has been on the UNESCO World heritage list since 1995, and has become a major tourist attraction. Both gardens, however, serve as medium for political messages today: Yuanming yuan symbolizes the barbarism of Western imperialism and the resilience of the Chinese masses, and Bishu shanzhuang celebrates the union of all ethnic peoples around the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

The Construction and Practices of Subordinated Audiences

Addressing the right audience was a state matter for Qianlong, especially since this audience was culturally as diverse as his empire, and included Chinese officials, Manchu bannermen, Mongol allies, and Tibetan monks. The gardens he designed and the poems and statements he wrote had human as well as divine audiences, who were supposed to respond in different but always favorable ways to his landscape projects. I do not know how Buddhist divinities and imperial ancestors experienced the environment Qianlong built to please them, and may only speak of reception intention based on Qianlong's own statements. I can nevertheless discuss the visitor's reactions to the spectacle of sacred ceremonials, which varied from admiration to cautious silence or amusement. It is easier to examine the responses of Qianlong's guests when they were directly engaged by Qianlong's vistas and responded in their writings to the imperial spectacle. A third type of audience Qianlong explicitly targeted is, curiously, you and me, and during the 20th century he succeeded in creating a series of contradictory receptions that all recognize the supremacy of his imperial vision. After years of expensive restoration by the national and provincial governments, Qianlong's gardens now simultaneously diffuse ultra-nationalist, internationalist, and multi-nationalist messages of welcome. As one of the UNESCO representatives of Chinese history, Chengde has integrated the global economy of landscape consumption, and

stem guardian of wisdom, and Bodhisattva of compassion.

has been on the list of two-week long circuits proposed by the tourist industry.

Entertainment and Absolutism

Today the Chengde gardens contribute again to a relentless propaganda enterprise that glorifies submission, recognition, and the enforcement of "ubiquitous peace and happiness." Jim Hevia has reported that a theater stage has been set up in an inner courtyard of the Chengde Potala Temple. Dancers who represent Tibetans and Mongols emerge in turn for "ethnic" performances. When their dances end, they sit at the front end of the stage and wait for Qianlong and his consort to emerge from a middle doorway in the rear. The "minority peoples" pay musical homage to both emperor and empress then, and the show concludes extolling the virtues of the unified, multi-ethnic motherland. Such spectacles remind the audience that Chengde was built and enlarged to maintain peace among the restless tribes north of the Great Wall, a political claim always perceived by Beijing as meaning the unity of the Han, Manchu, Hui, Tibetan and Uighur peoples. I presume that the Qianlong emperor could be satisfied by the resumption of such dances and celebrations as they would perpetuate the control of the Tibetan church and of its believers, a tradition that he started:

... Since the Sixth Panchen Lama, bLo-bzang dPal-ldan ye-shes, wanted an audience with Us [Qianlong], today We have constructed the Sumeru Temple of Happiness and Longevity on the left side of the Potala Temple [north of the Bishu shanzhuang gardens] and modeled it on his [Tibetan] residence in order to give him a restful place for meditation... This visit of the Panchen Lama is not in response to Our summons but came from his own desire to visit the capital in order to witness the flourishing of the Gelugpa sect, [Our] nurturing and teaching, the ubiquitous peace and happiness, and the plenitude of goods in China. At the same time, his visit has coincided with our seventieth birthday and it is a time for celebration. Now, We had not intended to allow extravagant ceremony and had prepared an edict to forestall this; however, with the visit of the Sixth Panchen Lama, we should not hinder [his wishes to honor Us]...

Qianlong's stele at the Sumeru Temple (excerpt), First week, Sixth month, Forty-fifth year [1780]².

The Spatial Issues of Social Reception

The issues I want to explore are several: the creation of a locale of ambivalence, access to space conceived for ambiguity, movement between semiotic

² Adapted from Peter Zarrow's translation of Qi Jingzhi, *Waiba miao beiwen zhuyi* [Annotated Translations of the Eight Outer Temples Stelaes] (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1985), pp. 97-98.

layers of landscape, and projection of self in a territory where the display of identification, reincarnation, and filiation was expected to command respect, fear, admiration, loyalty, or silence from the emperor's audience. At a practical level I would like to probe the value of garden reception as a means to reaffirm sovereignty as part of the harmonious order of nature, while at a more theoretical level I am interested in the unfolding of landscape intention into anticipated spaces for garden reception. When confronting issues of interpretation, I would examine Chengde records for what they show -- a political landscape -- as much as what they suggest -- a landscape of seduction, persuasion, and manipulation. To better assess the reception of Qianlong's claims, I may have to equate topographical representation and environmental perception since I am studying garden reception primarily as spatiality expressed in text. Qianlong's textual and iconographic records construct precise views of the gardens of Bishu shanzhuang, the centrality of Jinshan (Golden Mountain) Temple, and its connection with Pule Temple and Qingchui Peak (a substitute for Sumeru or Kailas, the mountain in the Himalayas which serves as Gods' residence). I cannot address directly landscape reception by the Qianlong court in Chengde because I am not aware of sources written by Qing officials that escaped censorship. The signification of the quasi silence of the Tibetan sources on reception in Chengde is similarly difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, I can draw on non-Qing sources to analyze foreigners' garden reception, and compare their responses to the one suggested by Qianlong when he addressed his imperial ancestors and his contemporary subjects. I may not establish any definite point about how reception has influenced the cultural response to garden landscape in Chengde. Instead, I will seek to discuss how the spectacle of gardens filled with metaphors has assisted in creating a space for reception. I would therefore want to highlight the efficacy of a few principles in the organization of space for reception, such as the transfer of ceremonial centers, the creation of porous border areas instead of closed boundaries to define spatial modes of reception, and finally the sense of equation between Qianlong's ontological units, which eventually results in the negation of history as chronology and geography as distance.

Textual Evidence on Landscape Experience

Sources on landscape experience in Chengde include multilingual stelae, such as the one of the Pule (Universal Joy) Temple that Qianlong sited to play the pivotal role when he addressed a metaphysical audience from his mundane gardens, and the Bishu shanzhuang stele in Chinese autographed by Qianlong. These stelae relate to the theme of reception because the emperor related on them what his expectations were. I would compare these texts to an earlier poem in Manchu, in which Qianlong

articulated his vision of landscape architecture for the benefit of the contemporary Manchu-Mongol audience as well as his own clan ancestors. With regard to landscape description, the *Rehe zhi*, the gazetteer of Chengde that Qianlong commissioned, is the most important and certainly the most easily available source of information on the representation of the gardens of Bishu shanzhuang. Like all the Chinese sources of the Qianlong period, the gazetteer was carefully censored, and may inform on imperial intentions only, because it remained excessively discreet on the topic of reception by court officials and envoys to the court. To explore the latter topic I will therefore need to rely mostly on materials that escaped Qing censorship because they were not destined for a Chinese audience. These materials relate the reactions of Qianlong's guests as they discovered the austere panorama of the Wulie valley and the pleasant oasis of Bishu shanzhuang. Such sources, which cover a few years during the last part of the Qianlong reign, include the reports of the British Marcartney mission, a travelogue by a Korean envoy which gave birth to a new genre in Korean belles-lettres, Tibetan and French accounts of the Panchen Lama's visit to Qianlong in Chengde, and several letters sent from Beijing by the Jesuit missionaries who had gone to Chengde with Qianlong. This comparative methodology may reveal the limits of Qianlong's subjugating strategy, and at the same time allow a functional comparison between Qing garden history and baroque garden history.



"Pi-shu shan-chuang tsong-t'u," _Je-he chih_ (Comprehensive Map of the Summer Hill Station of Chengde, from the Chengde Gazetteer)

