

The Intellectual Climate in Eighteenth-century China

Glimpses of Beijing, Suzhou and Yangzhou in the Qianlong Period

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Evaluations of the quality of civilization in the Qing period vary widely. Intellectual life has been described in terms ranging from 'stagnant' to 'flourishing'; Dr Hu Shih perceived in the critical scholarship of the period a flowering of scientific method; Joseph Levenson, describing more or less the same phenomena, wrote of 'the abortiveness of empiricism'. In a memorable essay Frederic Wakeman has dubbed the eighteenth century the era of 'High Qing', and has cited many of the superlatives that have been applied to the richly burgeoning life at that time. In various writings the eminent economic and social historian of the Qing, Mark Elvin, influenced no doubt by Joseph Needham's view that the pace of scientific thought and its application to technology slowed greatly after the sixteenth century, sees Qing China at its best as caught in a 'high-level equilibrium trap' that it could not escape until the West finally broke up China's set patterns, at the very end of the Qing era.¹ Those views, to be sure, are not precisely contradictory, but they suggest quite different evaluations. And many others could be cited.

Among twentieth-century Chinese historians themselves, some have looked upon the early and mid-Qing as a great age in Chinese history. But most have regarded the Manchu dynasty as a misfortune for China. Hostility toward the alien rulers and their policies has often been expressed in negative feelings toward the entire period of their rule, even toward the early and mid-Qing before the onset of the disastrous nineteenth century that all historians, Chinese and others, deeply deplored. I heard a very eminent Chinese historian give a lecture some fifteen years ago in which he praised the Qing as the most flourishing and splendid period in the entire Chinese past, citing irrefutable statistics on such things as levels of book production, education, philanthropy, growth of the economy and the like. A number of Chinese as well as Chinese-Americans in the audience debated hotly with him, denouncing the entire Qing period as a debased era from which modern China still

suffers. They almost came to blows. In mainland China recent historians have praised certain achievements of the Qing, especially the strengthening of centralized government, the territorial expansion that Manchu imperialism brought to the Chinese state, and the growth of the population as evidence of material well-being.² Historians today generally seem to have a less resentful attitude toward the Manchus than prevailed earlier in this century. Nonetheless modern Chinese evaluation of the cultural and social achievements of the Qing period still are not free of anti-Manchu feeling. Nor am I suggesting that they should be. That resentment however adds to the historian's difficulties.

Perhaps we must admit some elements of genuine paradox in the age which produced the elegant works of art displayed in the Phoenix exhibition of 1985. On the one hand, by many measures the eighteenth century flourished; on the other, it was beset by problems that indicate to most historians the presence of serious and growing weaknesses. The material level of the people's livelihood was very high, by world standards at that time and, I believe, in comparison with China in our time. The population, although only one-third of that today, was nonetheless at higher levels than had ever been reached in China previously. Until the very end of the eighteenth century peace reigned domestically; even the Qianlong Emperor's Ten Great Conquests were mostly inconsequential border campaigns. Also, through most of the century the Qing state, with the lowest official rates of taxation in history, nonetheless was solvent and often ran a surplus of receipts over expenditures. In a book about that century whose title includes the praise: 'The Ch'ing Empire in Its Glory,' Albert Feuerwerker has written: 'China in the reign of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor (1735-1796) was confident, prosperous, internally at peace, unchallenged at its frontiers.'³ The wealth and well-being of the society greatly impressed sophisticated foreign visitors; from the European Jesuits of the Kangxi reign to English servants of the competing British Empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

One of the most perceptive of those latter was Edward H. Cree, naval surgeon aboard a ship of the British squadron that fought its way up the Yangtze in 1842. On Sunday, 7 August, after the capture of Zhenjiang, as his ship approached Nanjing, he wrote in his journal:

The country gets more hilly on both sides of the river and a very pretty country in the distance rising into mountains. We passed some large villages and Tchang [Yizheng?], a large town on the north bank with the usual ornament, a tall pagoda. Many of the hills are surmounted by a pagoda, a joss-house, or a fort. The river winds much, is a wide and noble stream...the whole way along

a sight of high civilization and wealth, but with such bigoted rulers and fossilized customs they have neglected to provide effectively for their own defence. Most of the people appear to have deserted their houses near the river. We see only an occasional boat; most of the junks are deserted; all silent and sad where there must have been once the bustle of an extensive commerce.⁴

This was written fifteen years before the Taiping Rebellion unleashed its destructive fury throughout central and east China. Cree was a skilled amateur artist whose on-the-scene paintings and sketches effectively preserve the 'sight of high civilization and wealth' that so impressed him.

But his question remains: 'Why had China's high civilization and wealth not enabled it to provide effectively for the country's defense?' Cree blames 'bigoted rulers and fossilized customs,' an appraisal that expresses an outsider's sympathy for the people of a country with which his own great empire was waging what he calls 'this wretched war.' Many twentieth-century Chinese have made much the same assessment. For one example, the very influential modern historian, Meng Sen, made these comments in his lectures at Beijing University in the mid-1930s:

The western frontier was enlarged by ten-thousand *li*, sovereignty extended west of the Congling Mountains to all parts of Tibet and beyond. Within, the country was at peace, allowing civil government to flourish. Moreover, through the four reigns of Shunzhi, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong [that is, from 1644 to 1795] the intelligence of those rulers was quite above average. Warfare was halted and the arts of peace were cultivated.⁵ Their governing institutions were quite remarkable. From the times of the Three Dynasties of Antiquity onward, for tranquility and wealth, honor and glory,⁶ as well as for length of their reigns, that age has never been surpassed. Yet they were of overweening arrogance and extravagance; they ruthlessly slaughtered scholar-officials; they turned men into slaves. After the collapse of their dynasty when none had been willing to die in loyalty to them, they at last became aware of the reasons for their humiliation and downfall. Alas, then it was too late!⁷

There we see nationalistic pride in the vast expansion of the Chinese state under Manchu imperialism, and pride in its wealth and splendor, tempered by deep resentment against the Manchu conquerors for having misused their great power to intimidate and coerce the Chinese people into submission, with destructive consequences. In the end the Manchu rulers had their comeuppance, but only after a century of humiliation had brought sufferings to all the Chinese people.

If the specifically twentieth-century emotions in that view of the Qing can be placed in perspective, Meng Sen's assessment contains elements of a useful analysis of the conditions under which the 'arts of peace' were cultivated at the capital and in the great cities of the eighteenth century. First, there is the fact of immense wealth. Second, both the society as measured in terms of population growth and the state as measured by its expanding borders, were growing rapidly. Third, the dynasty saw a succession of able, intelligent but flawed rulers whose dynastic interests increasingly diverged from those of the Chinese people, or, at least, from the perceived interest of the people in the eyes of their natural leaders, the Chinese open elite of merit. Finally, to make explicit a point which Meng Sen has indicated indirectly, the glaring discrepancies between the dynastic pronouncements and its actual governing induced a widespread cynicism and disloyalty. How did those factors affect the intellectual climate of the age? Their interactions generated a new environment within which history took on its distinctive Qing qualities. That environment influenced some aspects of Qing civilization very deeply; others were less clearly shaped by the Qing temporalities. Sorting such issues out is one of the historian's more daunting tasks.

Let us start with the wealth of eighteenth-century Chinese society. Already by the sixteenth century China was becoming more productive than it had been, both in agriculture and in craft industries. It was also becoming more highly entrepreneurial, better organized to take advantage of the elements in commerce. The world beyond China's borders was in some measure responsible for those new elements. The Portuguese held Macao from the 1540s, and the Spanish the Philippines from the 1570s. Soon the Dutch and the English were competing with them for dominance of Asia's maritime trade. By the end of the sixteenth century much of the world's huge new silver production was flowing into China, in exchange for its renowned luxury goods.⁸ Without that massive influx of silver China was already rich; with it, the liquidity of wealth was enhanced and the ways of accumulating and using money proliferated. Merchants organized regional networks. They devised more effective ways of controlling the transport of goods, brokerage services, pawnshops and banking, and above all, the franchises to distribute the nation's salt, produced in government salterns. Salt production and distribution were monopolized by the state and were the number two source of its revenues, second only to its revenues from the agrarian taxes.⁹ Among the regional merchant networks two emerged as the strongest competitors for control of the entrepreneurial activities within China, the Shansi merchants based in that northern province, and the Anhui merchants whose home was Huizhou Prefecture in Southern Anhui, in the central

Yangtze. (The Huizhou merchants also were known by the old name for Huizhou's prefectural seat, Xin'an; in Ming and Qing times that city, and the district, were known as Shexian.) Scholarship and learning, book production, and the fine arts have always been dependent on wealth, in all societies in all times. One of the new elements in late imperial China was the linkage between the new forms of merchant wealth and the sponsorship of the 'arts of peace'. Anhui merchants played a great role in that.

The Three Great Rulers of the High Qing, 1662-1799

The rich life in central China was only briefly disturbed by the violent Manchu conquest in the 1640s. Seriously challenged in the 1670s, by the 1680s Manchu rule was secure. The second Manchu ruler to occupy the throne in Beijing, the great Kangxi Emperor who reigned from 1662 to 1722, was largely responsible for devising the modes of Manchu-Chinese cooperation in governing the realm and guiding the society. He sponsored learning and publishing, built gardens described by court poets and depicted by court painters, worked at but never mastered calligraphy, and collected works of art. In Jonathan Spence's brilliant biographical study he emerges as a man of lively and curious intelligence, great physical vigor, and at times of humane inclinations.¹⁰ The patterns of Manchu rule were well established by the time of his death in the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

His son the Yongzheng Emperor, who reigned only thirteen years, nonetheless left a profound mark on the patterns of ruling. He was a very clear-sighted and rigorous administrator. In his management of the bureaucracy, and the elite from which the bureaucrats were drawn, he tightened the systems of surveillance and control, adding a more powerful element of intimidation to that of enticement, of threat to balance reward. Because he relied on the secret memorial device for systematic covert control over the bureaucracy throughout the realm, and confined the highest decision making to the new Grand Council which met in rooms adjoining his private bedchambers deep in the inner palace, the powers of the state assumed awesome reality in his hands. Legends about him abound. Did he come to the throne by murdering his father, the senile Kangxi Emperor? Did he really die peacefully in his palace in the fall of 1735, or did he retire to a monastery to practice occult arts? Or was he murdered by the daughter of a man he had condemned for treason? Whatever the manner of his death – and historians mostly prefer the duller versions – he left to his son, the Qianlong Emperor a vigilantly

perfected machinery of state, amply financed. Quite incidentally, some modern critics consider him the best calligrapher and painter among the Qing emperors.

The young Qianlong Emperor had just passed his twenty-fourth birthday when his father died. He was not the eldest son – the Manchus did not practice primogeniture – but he had been favored by his grandfather when still a young boy, and was clearly the most able candidate when his father secretly designated him the heir. Harold Kahn's learned biographical study of him and of his time has brought us much closer to this enigmatic figure.¹¹ For me the word that most aptly describes him is grandiose, one that Kahn and others also have used for him, and for the tone of his age. The word is used here to convey both amazement and distaste; that is what I feel most consistently as I consider the man himself. Throughout his reign he struggled obsessively to outdo all the great emperors of the past, but especially to surpass his rather grander grandfather, the Kangxi Emperor. He retired effective New Year's Day in 1796 in the ultimate gesture of filial subservience – not daring to hold the throne longer than had his eminent forebear. But that gesture is as hollow as his innumerable other posturings. In fact he continued to rule from his retired emperor's quarters, making his resentful son look foolish. Thus his retirement was no less sham than the image of himself that he had striven to project throughout the interminable sixty years of his reign. In their essays for the exhibition catalogue, Harold Kahn has given us a vivid account of the Qianlong Emperor's 'taste,' and Howard Rogers a most detailed analysis of his sponsorship of painters and painting through the court academy.¹² More need not be said here about his involvement with art. But another aspect of his impact on the intellectual and psychological climate of the great art centers of his realm is worth some discussion.

The Kangxi Emperor had displayed considerable perception and sensitivity in gaining Chinese support for the Manchu dynasty, making it appear to be a plausible joint effort of all enlightened men in the service of universal – that is, traditional Chinese – ideals. And the Yongzheng Emperor, for all the sinister overtones, can be praised for a certain cool rationality in improving governmental functions. Both, it can be argued, misused power and perpetrated fraud. Such was the nature of imperial government. Both knew the usefulness of intimidation and protected the Manchu conquerors' status in China and in the steppe with ruthless acts. Yet both command a degree of respect for the balance and judgment they brought to their governing.

The Qianlong Emperor is, I believe, much harder to admire. True, there is evidence at least of impressive energy and wide-ranging awareness of issues, governmental, intellectual and artistic, if not of thoughtful judgment in such matters. At the age of eighty-three he appeared to the Earl Macartney, the British ambassador, to have the physical and mental alertness of a man twenty years younger.¹³ And if the famous letter that Macartney took back to King George III from that meeting is often cited as a fatuous monument to China's and the emperor's ignorance, we might better see it as a ritually appropriate document issued in response to a situation of whose true dimensions the emperor and his court were not really so ignorant, but hoped would go away.¹⁴

We cannot blame the Qianlong Emperor for having failed to foresee the nineteenth century. We can, I believe, blame him for the intemperate pursuit of policies, some launched by his grandfather and his father and some new to his reign, that made the essential cynicism of Qing rule all too obvious to the ruled. That slowly eroded the element of altruism and commitment necessary to good government, inducing the later political and social crises. The defects of his own character must bear most of the blame for that. His failures of judgment stemmed from his meanness of spirit, his unbounded egotism, and his belief that all men – or enough to serve his purposes – could be either bought or cowed. He was wrong. His lifelong sequence of grandiose gestures can be seen as a pathological, insatiable struggle to glorify himself, and simultaneously to overwhelm others. He was not, after all, a minor nabob on the Straits of Malacca who could be forgiven for making crude mistakes. He was the master of a grand and venerable civilization that had long been able to impart sophistication and judgment about human affairs. The philosophical and political traditions that he pretended to honor could have guided him. Pretending to be civilization's champion, he toyed with its superficial splendors and ignored its substance. He must be judged by its standards.

By the end of his life in 1799 Chinese society was deeply impaired, the foundations of its government weakened. The rulers' cynicism had spread to the governors, the civil servants. Their cynicism and disloyalty was penetrating the entire society. We must look at the roles of scholars and intellectuals, merchants and bureaucrats, artists and the arts, in the Qianlong reign in the light of these changes in the social environment.

Commenting on the intellectual climate of the Qing, K.C. Hsiao in his *History of Chinese Political Thought* notes that in the mid-seventeenth century there was a vigorous flowering of rather advanced political ideas.

That movement in thought had not immediately died out after the deaths of the great seventeenth-century figures such as Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) and Huang Zongxi (1610-1695). In the main they had pondered the failings of late Ming government, turning back to Confucius and Mencius for basic reaffirmation of political ethics, while at the same time beginning to develop quite new ideas about the importance of the nation. In political thought, as in some other fields, the seventeenth century was boldly critical and experimental. That did not last into the following century. Hsiao writes:

... After a long period of the Qing court's suppression of thought not only had such ideas as the basic importance of the people and the importance of the Chinese nation lost their luster, even interest in ordinary topics of political discourse had gradually cooled. Scholars and the learned elite either turned their efforts toward the evidential studies of ancient texts where they would not run afoul of taboos, or immersed themselves in the pursuit of rank and wealth via the writing of examination-style essays. Those among them who still retained a concern for the practical affairs of the world were in truth the exceptional minority. Moreover, the literary inquisition was tightly imposed, its restrictions and taboos extremely numerous. Persons who assumed positions and established their views might at any moment suffer awesome punishment. The two hundred years from the beginning of the Qing dynasty until the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns (1796-1850) corresponding to the period in which Manchu authoritarian government flowered and commenced to decline, were precisely the period in which Chinese political thought turned from a brief burgeoning toward the extreme degree of decline and weakness.¹⁵

The Qianlong Emperor's literary inquisition was a principal instrument for taming the previous vitality of Chinese political and social thought.¹⁶ It commenced within weeks after his accession when he reopened the case of Zeng Jing, a rebellious minded school-teacher in Hunan who had criticized the personal ethics of the Qing rulers and had espoused the anti-Manchu political thought of the early Qing thinker Lü Liuliang (1629-1683).¹⁷ The case had come to the attention of the court in the previous reign, but the Yongzheng Emperor had pardoned Zeng, and had responded to him by composing a defense of Manchu behavior couched in Confucian verbiage. Immediately upon succeeding to the throne the Qianlong Emperor recalled the widely disseminated texts of his father's defense statement, probably fearing that it revealed too much about life in the imperial household. He reversed the pardon granted to Zeng Jing. Many were executed in a ruthless purge of Zeng's family and associates, and the search for anti-Manchu sentiment, whether open or indirectly conveyed, whether intended or expressed in some innocent, unintended allusion, was launched. The form and scope of the inquisition grew

throughout the Qianlong reign. In the 1770s it took the form of the project to compile the great *Imperial Manuscript Library* (*Siku Quanshu*). The cultural and political evaluations of that project can take many directions. Regardless of whatever importance for scholarship it may have had, it simultaneously was one of the ever more elaborate forms of repression and intimidation that lasted until the end of his reign. Alongside the impact of the thought control, however, the quality of his governing gradually fell prey to corruption and cynicism, from the 1750s onward. In addition to the consequences of his vindictive personal style, a quite general Manchu misuse of elite privilege pervaded society. When this emperor called artists and scholars to his court in Beijing, and when he toured among the great centers of art and learning in the provinces, the dark shadow of his presence was deeply felt.

Beijing in the Qianlong Reign

At the capital, both in the inner palace city within the walls of Beijing and at the Yuanming Yuan palaces and parks in the western suburbs, and at the summer palace at Rehe (Jehol), the emperor maintained collections, built gardens, and housed painters, craftsmen, calligraphers and art historians. His grandfather had originally built the marvelous gardens, palaces and hunting parks at Rehe, called the Wanshu Yuan ('Garden of Ten Thousand Trees'). It was a place at the edge of the Inner Asian steppe where the court could take on some of the forms of life of the steppe, and where the emperor could meet tribal chieftains and accept their homage in an atmosphere ritually less demanding than at the court of Beijing. The Kangxi Emperor had initiated the idea of having poets describe the scenes there, the poems to accompany depictions commissioned from his favorite court painters. Ultimately his European Jesuit court artists also contributed illustrations of life at his court and on the steppe, and also made drawings of those to be sent to Europe to be redone as copper-plate engravings. His grandson grossly emulated that precedent. The Jesuit artists Giuseppe Castiglione, Denis Attiret and Ignaz Sichelbart were among those who created sixteen vast depictions of the Qianlong Emperor's Yili campaign of the late 1750s. Those were painted on the walls of a hall built in Beijing in the 1760s to commemorate military exploits of his reign, and cartoons by these Jesuits were sent to Paris for engraving on copper.¹⁸ European painting and decorative arts, thus, were part of the artistic environment of the Qing court from the founding of the dynasty through the eighteenth century. In his essay for the exhibition catalog, Harold Kahn has argued that this does not constitute evidence for a cosmopolitan atmosphere, however, for this

emperor in particular lacked the breadth of mind which that word connotes. He was interested in exotica; he did not enlarge his horizons to assimilate and understand them.

The Qianlong Emperor's favorite place was the Yuanming Yuan in Beijing's western suburbs, the great complex of palaces and gardens destroyed by Lord Elgin's British and French forces in 1861, and partially rebuilt to the vulgar taste of the Empress Dowager Cixi during the last decades of the nineteenth century. That is the place we know today as the Summer Palace. In his brilliantly imaginative essay on 'High Qing' Frederic Wakeman suggests that this place as the Qianlong Emperor fashioned it became the expression of his private self.¹⁹ It was the place where he escaped the ritualization of life at court and the formalities of government, to realize his inner self. There is much in that observation. It truly does seem that this emperor thought of himself as filling different imperial roles when he took on the different modes of life made possible by the changes of setting. He moved about, from the Forbidden City within Beijing to the Summer Palace in the western suburbs, and to the still different mode of life at the other summer place in Rehe at the edges of the steppe. And when he went on his six Southern Tours he played still a different role, much more public than the others, designed to impose the awe and majesty of the imperial presence on the consciousness of the Chinese people. Wakeman is quite convincing in describing the role of the recluse literatus emperor in his Yuanming Yuan palaces as his favorite pretension, the role in which he was the most comfortable. He greatly expanded the parks and gardens and wrote dozens of poems describing his favorite scenes there. He supervised the publication of those poems in an edition illustrated by forty woodblocks based on paintings by Shen Yuan and Sun Hu, commissioned for the purpose.²⁰ The 'inner self' that the poet-emperor and his illustrators convey to us is a person who delighted in bucolic simplicity, in modest buildings set in hills and trees, with no people in sight. But is the person so artfully revealed there the emperor's real self? The British artist W. Alexander who accompanied the Earl Macartney in the embassy of 1793 visited the Yuanming Yuan and has left at least one drawing of the building there used for informal audiences (Figure 1). To him it was a scene of imperial grandeur.²¹ As we compare his view of that hall with the one in the emperor's illustrated poetry collection, we must ask what accounts for the differences (Figure 2). I think it truly is an aspect of the emperor's personality that is revealed in the simple woodblock illustration, a personality here striving to take on the highly conventionalized ideal of lofty literatus simplicity. Yet Alexander's more literal rendering shows us that this was no humble 'thatched palace'. The emperor's poems and the illustrations for them are

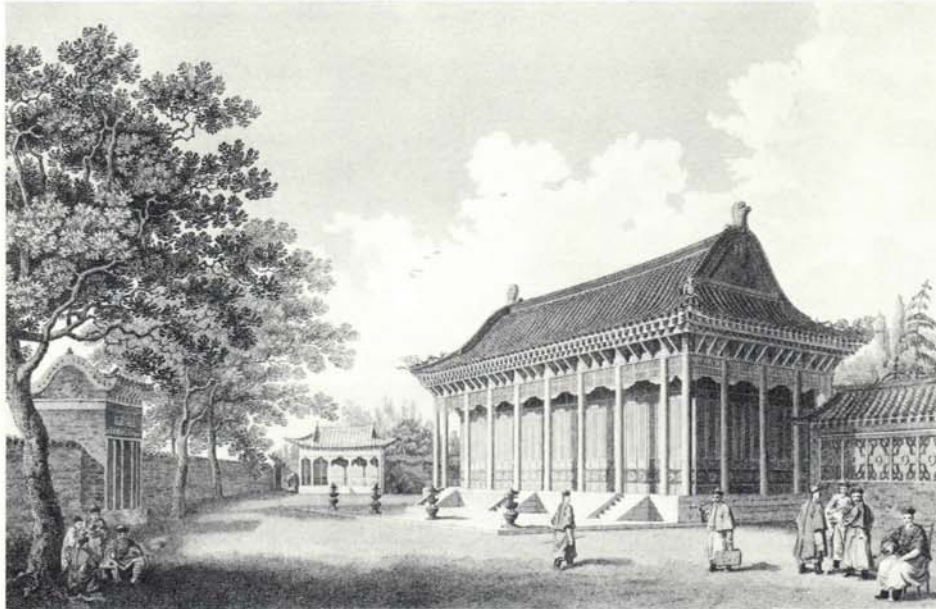


Figure 1. The Audience Hall at the Summer Palace, Beijing, as seen by the Earl Macartney, ambassador of King George III to the Qianlong Emperor in 1793. This scene was drawn by W. Alexander, artist attached to the embassy; it is accompanied by another plate giving a surveyed ground plan for the building, with measurements, suggesting that this view is accurate as to size and scale. Plate from Sir George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, Vol. III (London, 1793); Courtesy of the Gest Library, Princeton University.

a record of extravagant sham. The preface to the poem on this particular building, ostensibly written by the emperor himself, contains the following lines:

At the south of the [Yuanming] Yuan people enter and leave by the Gate of the Worthy and Upright, just inside of which is the Main Hall. Neither carved nor painted, it achieves the ideal of the pine tree pavilion and thatched palace.²²

That is an allusion to the language used by Wang Bo (648-675) to describe the newly rebuilt Jiucheng Palace, the 'Palace of Nine Perfections'; a retreat to which early Tang emperors fled to escape the heat of Changan's summers.²³ I take Alexander's drawing to be a fairly straightforward architectural rendering; it provides a scale by which to measure

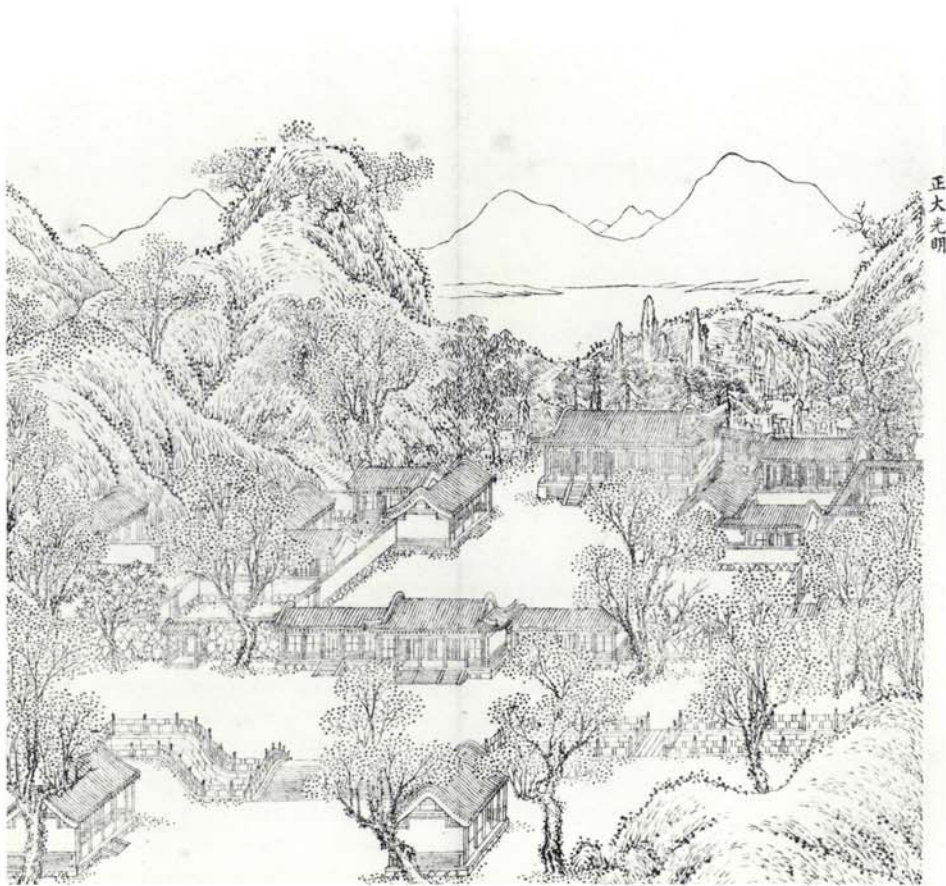


Figure 2. The Audience Hall at the Summer Palace, Beijing, as illustrated in a book of poems and scenes compiled for the Qianlong Emperor in 1745, entitled *Yuanming Yuan Sishijing Shi bing Tu* (1887 reprint). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the false minimization sought by the emperor. The 'inner self' revealed to us in his Yuanming Yuan setting is an elaborate poser.

How then should the intellectual climate of Beijing during the long Qianlong reign be characterized? It was not, to be sure, as barren as that of Beijing throughout the recent Mao era, but in some ways paralleled that. In both, one might point out, a great deal of editing and publishing of old texts was undertaken. In both cases the large projects to edit and publish were devices for making use of scholars who had suffered signifi-

cant loss of intellectual independence – a total loss, in the case of the Mao era. Each ruler thought of himself as a poet, and each had much help with his literary efforts. Mao, however, wrote his rough-and-ready poems sparingly; the Qianlong Emperor wrote more poems than any figure in Chinese history, 42,000 of them, all (in the opinion of such scholars as Hu Shih) atrocious. He produced those at the rate of almost two poems per day throughout the sixty years he was on the throne.²⁴ Both Mao and the emperor were praised extravagantly by sycophantic courtiers for their poetry, as for all their other effluvia. With authority so reinforced, both took it upon themselves to decide which elements of the Chinese tradition had value and should be preserved; in that, it was clear to many that their decisions were based on self-interest more than on concern for culture. Of the two, while both were destructive, the emperor must yield to the modern tyrant for the scale of destruction achieved. These two rulers' self-deceptions eventually caught up with them. They were hated by many, and denounced as soon as people dared. One thing above all they have in common: both have left an immense and profound mark on their nation's history. The major differences are that one was the traditional type of despot; the other was a creature of our own times, with powers and pretensions unknown in the past. And, the Qianlong Emperor was fundamentally cynical in his manipulation of persons and of symbols; the late Chairman Mao seems to have been more earnest, if disastrously so, hence more self-deceived, in what he was doing.

While the differences are, for our purposes here, more important than the similarities, the comparison of the Qianlong reign with an era we know from our recent experience may nonetheless suggest something about the intellectual climate in Beijing through the second half of the eighteenth century. In the provinces, on the other hand, especially in the great central China cities such as Suzhou, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, Nanjing and Yangzhou, the atmosphere was livelier and more creative than in the capital – but that was true from Yuan and Ming times onward. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the eighteenth century in intellectual history is that despite the intimidating consequences of Manchu surveillance and the death of political thought that K.C. Hsiao has observed in the passage quoted earlier, those limitations on the expression of political and social thought did not turn the age into one of utter intellectual sterility. Those limitations could deflect the currents and restrict the choice of vehicles, but they could not extinguish all intellectual activity. Modern technology has greatly improved upon the means of control throughout a society, but still has not succeeded in giving despots infallible instruments for that purpose. Much less did the Qing state possess the means to extinguish all creativity.

Thus it is not really an anomaly that the Qianlong reign corresponds to the period during which a potent new development in philology led to the flowering of what has been called 'evidential scholarship' (*kaozheng xue*). On the one hand, that can be disparaged as 'safe' learning in an age of repression. On the other hand, however, it is universally recognized as having accomplished the great ordering of classical scholarship, coupled with remarkable advances in philology and historical linguistics, and the extension into historiography of the methods generated by the critical spirit in classical exegesis. Qing critical scholarship provides the lens which all subsequent scholarship on China's past must utilize; that remains true today. I believe it is fair to say that Beijing was peripheral to the achievements of Qing critical scholarship, despite the emperors' efforts to assemble there large numbers of proficient scholars to work on their great bibliographical, classical and historical projects. The provinces produced the competent scholar elite; the capital consumed but did not exhaust that resource. We must recognize the high value of Qianlong period scholarship.

The importance of the eighteenth century in intellectual history however goes beyond even the most generous assessment of Qing critical scholarship. Professor Yu Ying-shih has noted that in stressing the achievements of critical scholarship, particularly in the focus on *kaozheng xue* (which he translates more narrowly as 'philology'), historians have obscured the fact that its most important minds were above all philosophers. The concern of the critical scholars was not limited to ensuring the correctness of texts: they pursued a wide range of Neo-Confucian philosophical issues.²⁵ He sees the Qing as the third and final phase in the development of Neo-Confucianism, and labels it the age of Qing Confucian intellectualism. He describes this phase as having achieved intellectual bases for rejecting earlier Neo-Confucian anti-intellectual pan-moralism, thus turning away from subjective idealism toward a focus on intellectual knowledge rationally apprehended. The two leading figures in this development are, in his view, Dai Zhen (1724-1777) and Zhang Xuecheng (1738-1801), both Qianlong period scholars and philosophers. Yu of course does not reject the 'environmental explanation,' the view that Manchu repression deeply affected Qing intellectual life. But, he says, the internal histories of intellectual developments ultimately must provide the specific answers to why intellectual change occurred as it did. The Manchu rulers could at most deny the period's intellectuals access to certain avenues for the fuller development of their thought, and could subject individuals to punishment for the expression of certain ideas, in order to intimidate the intellectual community. But they could not block all thought and expression. To summarize my view (not neces-

sarily Professor Yu's), the Qianlong Emperor in his hyperactive intervention into almost everything was a pompous, petty-minded nuisance. To those whose heads rolled he was a grievous nuisance. He was able to exert an immense force in history, now despicable, now ludicrous, now and then politically effective. The things we value most about his age, however, have histories of their own, in which he is but a form of environmental blight.

Yangzhou comes close to dominating our sense of eighteenth-century Chinese painting and calligraphy. It was indeed a very special place in that century, even though certain artists associated with the place in the previous century, including Daoji, Gong Xian and Lan Ying to name but three, may today be regarded as greater figures in art history than any of the eighteenth-century masters of the Yangzhou School. Before looking more closely at Yangzhou, it is useful to have in mind what the eighteenth century was like in other great cities of artistic activity. Suzhou is the obvious choice to represent them.

Suzhou in the Eighteenth Century

Suzhou had long been one of the most stable centers of wealth, of learning and of artistic activity. In choosing it to represent the best of life in the provinces in the eighteenth century we must nonetheless remember that it in fact had several competitors. China's many large cities away from the capital not only were not 'provincial' in the sense that it is customary to apply that word to any place in France away from Paris, they also were units in extensive networks of urban centers that were too far-flung and varied to be dominated from any one point. Still, Suzhou was the prefectural city of the most populous prefecture in China. With perhaps 600,000 urban and suburban residents the city was one of the largest in China, and one of the country's most bustling centers of wealth and trade. At the same time it had long been famed as an elegant city of art and learning, and of the cultivated norms of elite life.²⁶

Suzhou of course was included in the Southern Tours of both the Kangxi and the Qianlong Emperors.²⁷ One of the artists commissioned to paint commemorative pictures of the Qianlong Emperor's tours was the court painter Xu Yang. His visual record of Suzhou, dated 1759, is not one of those officially commissioned commemorative paintings, but appears to have been painted to recall for the emperor the glories of the city and the region that he had observed on his second Southern Tour, in 1757. It has none of the stiff formality of the paintings of the actual visits of the

emperor to various places on the itineraries of the tours; those show guard troops lined up in ranks, outriders preceding the palanquin, citizens kneeling as the emperor approaches, and ritualized reverence displayed on all sides.²⁸ Instead the Suzhou scroll is an exuberant celebration of the rich life of all sectors of society under ordinary circumstances. Xu Yang has named his painting *Shengshi Zisheng Tu*, or 'Scenes of Burgeoning Life in a Resplendent Age'.²⁹ It is the finest historical document bearing on the life of a Qing period city known to me. In the form of a long narrative scroll, it might better be called an 'itinerary scroll'; for it follows part of the route of the 'Imperial Way' (*Yudao*) that circled west from the city through the gentle hills of the Lingyan Range and on down to the northeast shores of Lake Tai, then back to the city. Long sections of it focus on the busy commercial life concentrated along the Grand Canal by the west wall of the city. The scroll ends by leading the viewer past the famous Maple Bridge and on to Tiger Hill on the northwest corner of the city. In its exaggerated praise of the emperor as the source and guarantor of all this rich life, Xu Yang's colophon reminds us that all courtiers were required to be fawning sycophants.³⁰ Nonetheless, because the emperor's visit is not the subject, the artist has been able to concentrate on the city itself, although he warns the viewer that it is a subject 'the artist's brush cannot fully encompass'. We must be grateful that he tried. Along the route of the Imperial Way he has tried to show:

... the imposing security provided by walls and moats, the expansive majesty of the many halls of government, the charm and beauty of hills and streams, as well as the woodsmen on the heights and the fishermen below, farming and textile-making closely interspersed, merchants and traders flocking together, markets and shops row upon row. It constitutes a metropolitan center of the southeast.³¹

As for Suzhou's intellectual climate, its academies were headed by some of the great scholars of the age. When the Qianlong Emperor made his first tour of the south in 1751 Qian Daxin (1728-1804), one of the greatest of the dynasty's scholars, was but a young student at Suzhou's famed Ziyang Academy; near the end of the emperor's reign Qian Daxin became that academy's director. Hui Dong (1697-1758), one of the most powerful minds of the School of Han Learning, meaning evidential or critical scholarship, was a native of Suzhou and taught there as private scholar most of his life. He and a following among his students were recognized as the 'Suzhou School' within the larger movement of critical scholarship. Suzhou was at the forefront of the leading scholarly trends of the time. The same could be said for its place in literature, and in musical and dramatic performance. Its artistic tradition was perhaps the most

enduringly important one in all of Ming and Qing China. Suzhou and the many rich cities nearby constituted a stable center of cultural vitality, nurtured by the prosperity that is so obvious in Xu Yang's painting.

Yangzhou in the Qianlong Era

Yangzhou, nonetheless, draws more of our attention as a city of painters in the eighteenth century. Yangzhou is a strategically located ancient city in a rich region of central-east China; like Suzhou, it shared the lower Yangtze and Grand Canal water transport systems that served both the government and private trade. It was a city of large compass, its city walls having been doubled in size during the Song dynasty by the rather unusual method of enclosing a 'new city' side-by-side with the old, leaving the former moat and north wall in place to divide the two halves. Gu Yanwu, the seventeenth-century savant who looked into such things thought Yangzhou representative of the spacious ground-plans and uncrowded land-use patterns that for him typified Song period regional cities. The Grand Canal flows past the corner of Yangzhou's walls on the south and east. The city is located a scant twenty miles north of the Yangtze, opposite Zhenjiang on the south bank. Nanjing is about sixty miles up-river from that point, and Suzhou is a convenient one hundred and fifty miles or so to the southeast, on the Canal. Thus Yangzhou is just on the northern rim of the triangle enclosed by Nanjing, Shanghai and Hangzhou, with Suzhou and the Lake Tai region at its center. Since Southern Song time (1126-1279) the arts and learning of China's high civilization had been disproportionately represented in that triangle. Each of its five greatest cities – Yangzhou, Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai – has at some time dominated the region in one way or another, politically, economically or culturally. Yangzhou, the oldest of them as a major administrative center in imperial times, had waned in relative importance through the middle centuries of the imperial era, but had begun to regain importance and wealth in the Ming (1368-1644). Its location was favored not only with regard to the inland water transport networks, but also by its proximity to the coastal salt flats to its east. That region, administratively called the Lianghuai Salt Fields, had long been the most productive of China's salt producing areas. The Ming dynasty devised an administrative system for the production and the distribution of salt that by late Ming times had come to center on Yangzhou. The economic consequences of that transformed the city, starting in the sixteenth century, by creating a prosperity there that lasted until early in the nineteenth century. After that time, changes in the social and administrative circumstances displaced the Yangzhou merchant salt franchise

holders. The famous Yangzhou scholar-official Ruan Yuan (1764-1849), between postings in distant provinces, regularly visited the city that had still been so splendid in his youth, and noted the decline that set in just after 1800. In 1834, in a postface for the famous book illustrating and describing the good life in Yangzhou, the *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* (1795), Ruan wrote:

During the past ten years or more I have heard reports that the decline and desolation grow ever more serious. For it was those whose business was salt who built the gardens of Yangzhou. Now many of the old merchant families are no longer in business. Humble scholars in the now impoverished remnants of the academies are mostly poor and in hardship; government clerks and the ordinary kinds of small merchants can scarcely feed themselves.³²

Our concern, however, is the resplendent eighteenth century, not the lamentable nineteenth.

How had salt brought Yangzhou to the importance that peaked in the eighteenth century, only to lose it so shortly thereafter? It is a long and complicated story of changes in the administrative structure, starting in Ming times. The Ming government linked the profitable franchises for buying and distributing salt (in theory, legally produced only under government control) to the state's problems in supplying the border garrisons on the northern frontier with arms and provisions. Merchants were granted the right to purchase government salt at the salt fields and to monopolize its distribution and sale to the consuming public, with defined regions assigned to each of the salt field zones. In return for this franchise, merchants had to deliver supplies to the Great Wall defense line. The system for accomplishing these rather artificially-linked matters evolved over time, with a number of changes along the way. To simplify, by the year 1600 it had changed in ways that gave ever fuller scope to merchant control, of both production and distribution. The great merchant networks alone had the capital and the organization to compete for the franchises. The state encouraged them to monopolize; a relatively small number of merchant households, members of the regionally-based merchant networks, gained the hereditary privilege of bidding for the annual quotas of salt. It was a case of the state letting the private sector perform for it tasks that otherwise would have required the creation of a specialized bureaucracy.³³

Two great regional networks of merchants had achieved special prominence during the Ming, the Shanxi merchants and the Anhui merchants. In the Lianghuai salt business based at Yangzhou the Anhui merchants

gradually squeezed out most of the Shanxi and other competition.³⁴ All of central China, the largest of the distribution regions defined by the government, became their private market. Yangzhou became the prime entrepreneurial field of action of men from Huizhou, the prefecture in southern Anhui from which the merchants mostly came. Gradually Yangzhou salt interests came to play an ever larger role in setting the tone of life back in the home region of Huizhou. At the same time the Anhui merchant families that were long resident in Yangzhou tended to make it the permanent base for branches of their lineages, and while they acknowledged their Anhui identity, they became the dominant element in the elite of Yangzhou, and were accepted as such. The behavior of these communities offers fascinating material for the social historian.³⁵

The Manchus left intact the Ming system of joint state and private capital management of the salt monopolies, and permitted the private merchant role to grow even larger. It has been estimated that the capital accumulation of the group of about sixty great merchant families involved in the bidding for the Lianghuai salt totalled eighty or more million silver taels, a sum greater than the annual tax revenues of the Qing state at that time. Fortunes of one-million taels silver were common, and the great houses amassed fortunes of ten million or more. That was at a time when district magistrates received salaries and supplementary emolument from the state in the range of 500 to 1200 taels per year, and a laborer could support his household of five persons on about twelve taels per year. It has been suggested that the Yangzhou salt merchants were the richest group of persons in the world at that time. They owned Yangzhou, could buy influence with its governors, and overwhelmed its social and its cultural life. Nothing like that had existed before in Chinese history. The nearest parallel in later Chinese history, the Co-hong merchants at Canton in the late eighteenth century and on into the early nineteenth were a smaller group, and as a group did not have comparable wealth.³⁶

Yangzhou in the eighteenth century raises all kinds of questions about the nature of pre-modern capitalism in China. The Anhui merchants, from a poor mountainous region, found in trade a way out of the poverty of their home region. They developed remarkable entrepreneurial skills, built organizations to control markets, perfected all the instruments of trade, and conquered by besting the competition. They knew how to accumulate capital and deploy it for high economic returns. Under the necessity to develop competitiveness and high performance, they achieved their dominant position. But the conditions that the Qing government imposed upon them, while not intended to diminish their dominance, seem to have diverted them away from their earlier hard-

headed economic judgment and practices. The Qing state seems to have colluded with them in corruption, intimidated them, sucked millions out of them in 'voluntary contributions', and enticed or driven them into lifestyles in which the merchant skills were given less prominence. A leading historian specializing on the Anhui merchants has written that it was Qing policy to 'gentrify' the great merchants, by inducing them to adopt scholar-bureaucrat, that is, 'gentry' ideals and values. In Yangzhou at least they came to lead lives that dissipated rather than generated wealth.³⁷ Yangzhou in the eighteenth century had eight academies for the training of scholar-bureaucrats where we might have expected one or two. In 1600 the Ming government created a special household registration category for merchants, meaning the salt merchants exclusively, and under the Qing sons from this social group had a separate eligibility in the civil service examinations. They won the higher degrees in higher proportion than any group in society.³⁸ Cynically, I believe, the Qing government sought to give rewards to the most talented of the merchants that would be more attractive to them than the alternatives they might have gained had they devoted their extraordinary abilities more directly to the pursuit of wealth by entrepreneurship. They were guaranteed the monopoly on licit and illicit wealth from salt without performing in all the ways necessary to merchant success – risk taking, self-confidence, and the ability to work effectively in mutual interest groupings. Instead, let the brightest and most energetic among them win social prestige and status in officialdom, but in an alternative game played according to the government's well-controlled rules. Under the Qing, the identity and self-identification of this group of great merchants became ambiguous.

K.C. Hsiao has said that the Qing rulers controlled the Chinese elite needed to make government work for them by a combination of enticements and intimidations.³⁹ In the case of the Yangzhou salt merchants we can clearly see the enticements. The other side of the coin is that the Yangzhou merchants were subjected to constant demands to give of their wealth to the rulers and to the state, and they were kept submissive by inflicting spectacular punishments on them from time to time, for crimes having to do usually with the misuse of their wealth – bribing officials, concealing profits, smuggling and the like. On the one hand, their great wealth could buy them only a seriously circumscribed security; the government could break them at any time. On the other, their wealth itself made them especially vulnerable. They lacked protection under law of the kinds that the great merchant communities of early modern Europe had achieved. For if they 'owned' Yangzhou in a material sense, they did not frame its laws, appoint its government, or devise its political authority. In Europe merchants could buy kings and rule city-states. In

China, emperors could confiscate wealth and destroy any member of society. The insecurity of the great merchant patrons of art and learning also is an element in the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century, for by that time many merchants had come to participate fully in scholar-official elite life alongside the persons who, more ideally, had long composed that elite stratum.

There is still another element in Yangzhou's special circumstances that must have affected feelings and attitudes throughout Yangzhou society in the eighteenth century. One must speculate that this special circumstance added a further measure of insecurity to the society. It has to do with the way in which Yangzhou fell to the Manchu armies in the new dynasty's drive to incorporate central China, after claiming the throne in Beijing in 1644. In that military campaign Yangzhou became a main point of resistance to the Manchus. In May of 1645 the city was surrounded by the armies commanded by Dodo, an uncle of the seven-year old Shunzhi Emperor in Beijing, and younger brother of the prince regent, Dorgon. Defending Yangzhou was one of the great heroes of Ming history, Shi Kefa. After Yangzhou was ringed in by Dodo's armies, Shi Kefa stoutly defended it for a week, against great odds. When the city fell he refused all surrender terms, so was killed. Then, to intimidate other cities further south, Dodo ordered his troops to plunder and slaughter; a truly outrageous massacre went on for ten days of looting and burning, rape and murder. The experience of valiant Yangzhou was vividly described in a number of books and essays, such as *Yangzhou Shiri Ji* ('Record of the Ten Days at Yangzhou') that the Qing government tried unsuccessfully to suppress. Yangzhou's Ten Days became one of the great symbols of righteous Chinese resistance to alien conquest.⁴⁰ That aspect of their city's history was of course in all minds in eighteenth-century Yangzhou and throughout the region, but it must have been spoken about only guardedly, and no one dared to mention it in writing except in terms that glorified the Manchu conquest.⁴¹ Even a century later, it must be assumed, this deeply-felt event in a suppressed but not forgotten history was a source of unease and resentment in the intellectual climate of Yangzhou.

Patronage and Cultural Life in Yangzhou

Many of the leading merchant families from other parts of China had been resident in Yangzhou for a century or more by the eighteenth century. They were still designated 'sojourners' and they still sent large sums of money back to their Anhui relatives, yet their impact on the arts

and on learning came to be more evident in Yangzhou than in Anhui. The issues of their economic power in relation to the growth of a modern Chinese economy have often been recognized. We might also consider the effects of their patronage on the phenomenon of distinctive regional schools of painting and of scholarship. A great school of painting had developed in southern Anhui in the middle and late Ming, to flower in the seventeenth century. It is called the 'Huangshan School' after the scenic mountains, the Yellow Mountains, that lie adjacent to Huizhou. James Cahill and his students have described that school of painters in their scholarly exhibition catalog, *Shadows of Mount Huang*, and have called attention to the links between that development in art and the Huizhou merchants as patrons and collectors. But, they note, as a distinctive 'local school' of painting, the Anhui School '... so creative and yet so diverse through the last quarter of the seventeenth century, did not survive long after 1700'.⁴² Why not? The regional pride of the Anhui people did not diminish, nor did the levels of patronage of the sojourning merchants from Anhui residing in Yangzhou in the eighteenth century. Professor Yu Ying-shih has advised us not to place too heavy emphasis on 'environmental theories' to explain the movements in philosophy in eighteenth-century China, noting that some aspects of change derive from 'internal factors'.⁴³ The history of stylistic change in art, in some essential ways, also reveals its own inner impulses, its fundamental creative freedom. Nonetheless some environmental factors merit attention. I suggest that the Yangzhou merchants, while proud of their Anhui roots, were nonetheless an assimilating, accommodating group in Yangzhou. The sophisticated environment which their money and their tastes created there was sensitive to the powerful influences of the lower Yangtze, especially those from Suzhou and Hangzhou. Even while the regionally-colored Anhui School of painting had been at its height in the mid-seventeenth century, Yangzhou was drawing to it painters such as Daoji and witnessing a magnificent flowering of art that was of at least equal vigor and importance. Anhui merchant money had something to do with both those seventeenth-century developments, the one strong in Anhui local color, the other transcending local boundaries.

The Yangzhou merchants enhanced that city's importance as the locus of interchange of the major cultural forces generated throughout China. They did not make it a cultural outpost of Southern Anhui in the seventeenth century, and still less in the eighteenth. For one example, in their home prefecture of Huizhou the rich merchants created one of the most distinctive styles in Chinese urban residential architecture. Yet the visual evidence shows that in Yangzhou their lavish residences and gardens bore no traces of that distinctive Anhui architectural style (Fig-

ure 3). Their gardens and country houses are in the style of Suzhou and Hangzhou, more or less the non-local, dominant style for architecture in that climate zone. In Yangzhou at that time, no doubt in response to their lavish tastes, was created one of the four great regional cuisines of China that have endured into the present century. It does not appear to owe any debts to Anhui provincial cooking. As sponsors of printing and publishing at Yangzhou the Anhui merchants were not provincial-minded; they sponsored the publication of the works that their century found to be of the greatest general value. As devoted patrons of the drama they favored performers brought from Suzhou, but also sponsored theater troops from Hubei that performed the newly developing opera, the direct antecedent of the modern Beijing opera.⁴⁴ In short, the intellectual and cultural climate that their money and their personal involvement created at Yangzhou was anything but narrowly provincial, and certainly was not an extension of Anhui parochialism.

An Image of Elite Life in Yangzhou in 1743

To gain a closer look into the intellectual climate of Yangzhou in the Qianlong period, we can do no better than to examine a painting described in the catalog of the exhibition, *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor, 1735-1795*.⁴⁵ It is the painting by Fang Shishu and Ye Fanglin, called *The Ninth-Day Literary Gathering at Xingan*. It is tempting to look upon this object as an icon, or at the very least as a microcosm of cultivated life in mid-eighteenth-century Yangzhou. It has been previously published in a catalog from the Cleveland Museum where it is accompanied by Wai-kam Ho's excellent study, including his translation of a colophon by Li E (1692-1752) that explains the occasion and identifies the persons.⁴⁶ Noting that the painters have shown this garden cut off from the world by autumn trees at one end and by a plain white wall at the other, Wai-kam Ho concludes his essay with this insightful comment:

Within this enclosure, a special afternoon in eighteenth-century China was quietly celebrated by a group of friends whose subdued joy and contentment speak well of the character of that particular day – a day of friendship, of nostalgia, and of a philosophical reckoning with the impermanence of things, including life.

This is a most fitting, even a moving comment. Yet I believe it may be interesting to push a bit farther into this enclosed scene to explore some of its subjects' links to the world beyond the elegant garden.

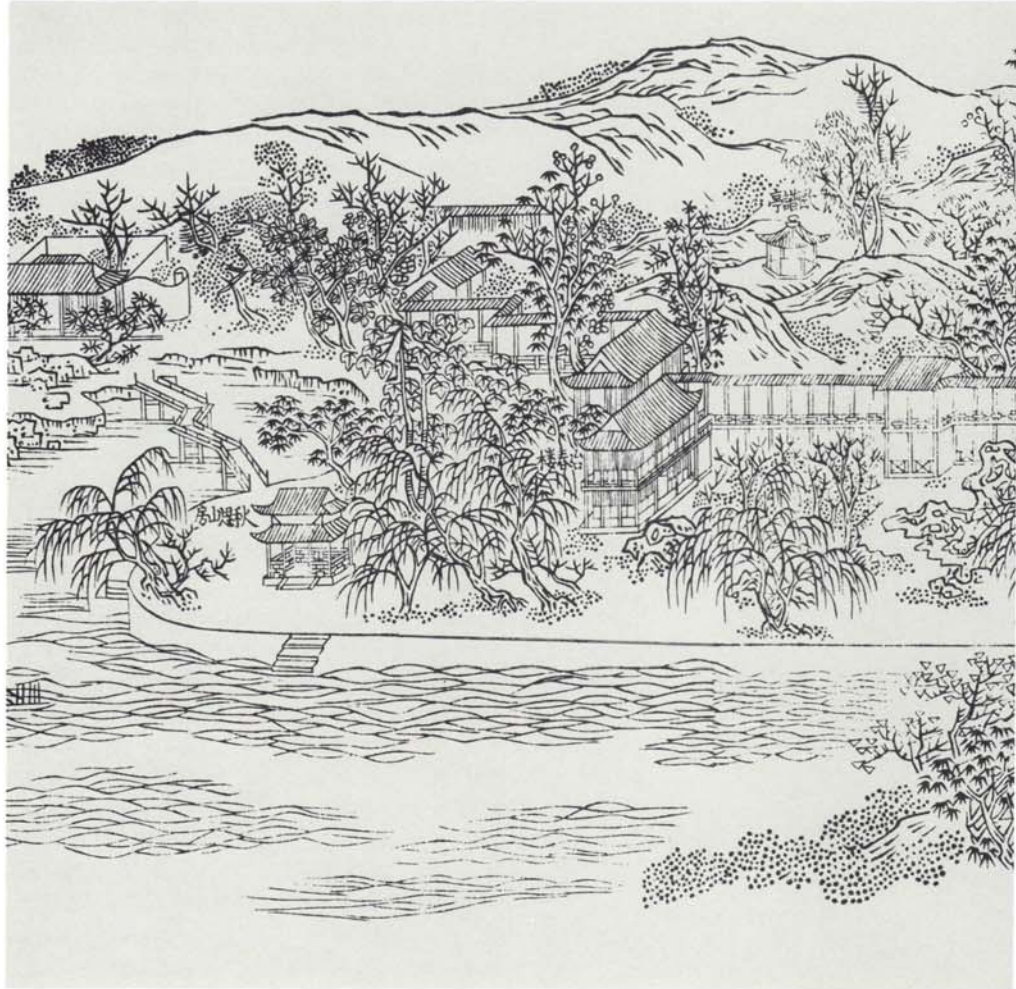


Figure 3. Hongqiao ('The Rainbow Bridge') in the extensive western suburbs of Yangzhou. It crosses the Baozhang River, today known as Shou Xihu, or Slender West Lake, then lined with gardens, villas and pavilions of the rich. From Zhao Zhibi, *Pingshan Tang Tuzhi* (Japanese re-cut edition, 1843), nos. 50-51; courtesy of the Gest Library, Princeton University.



The occasion for the literary gathering is the festival of Double Nine, or Chongyang, the ninth day of the ninth moon, which in 1743, the year of the gathering depicted, fell on 25 October. The garden is a very small retreat just outside one of the western gates of the 'new city', the northern addition added to Yangzhou's walled area in the Song dynasty. In a 'Preface' written in 1746 for this painting, one of the other persons depicted in it, the great scholar Quan Zuwang (1705-1755), writes of the noisy bustle of the vulgar crowds that overwhelm Yangzhou, and of the rarity of pure song in refined gatherings such as this one. The garden known as the Xingan ('temporary retreat') belonging to his friends, the Ma brothers, is but a little place they have built, on no more than five *mu*, that is, less than one acre, of land that formerly was part of the ancient Tianning Temple compound, and still earlier, in the fourth century AD, had served as the temporary retreat of the brilliant statesman-litterateur Xie An (320-385). It is filled with ancient trees and luxuriant growth of all kinds, where the birds of spring and the crickets of autumn fill the air with their pure singing. Although the garden is close by the unclean city, it is a world apart. Quan's preface continues:

Going out its gate, a distance of no more than a few hundred paces, all one can see are the yellow dust and the sullied waters, arousing feelings of disgust. But once one arrives within this place one feels the calm of hills and woods. On the Double Nine day in the eighth year of Qianlong the Ma brothers assembled fourteen members of their poetry society to make an offering to the spirit of Tao Qian. A line-drawing (*baimiao*) portrait of him from their collection, painted by Qiu Ying (c. 1510-c. 1552), was hung in the pavilion, and each person composed a poem. I was detained on my way from Hangzhou so did not get to participate. Ten days or so thereafter when I arrived, the gentlemen were planning to have a painting made to record the occasion. Mr Ma Yueguan said to me: 'You must not be missing from this group.' Therefore he repeated the event at a later date to allow me to be fitted in among the company at the end of the scroll. Also Mr Hong Chuxi [Hong Zhenke] had been forced to miss both meetings because of illness, but because he is indeed one of the members of the poetry society, he too was added in.⁴⁷

Quan's 'Preface' goes on to make an elaborate comparison. He contrasts the situation when Xie An had used this place for a retreat, fourteen-hundred years earlier, and the present circumstances of the group in the painting. For in the fourth century the empire was in turmoil caused by the invasions of the Five Barbarian nations from the north, and Xie An himself was the victim of slanderous attacks by political enemies, limiting his ability to defend the state against the invaders. So he grieves for old Xie An who, although in other circumstances was famed for his cultivation of idle graces, was truly beset by woes when resident in the garden

retreat that has given its name to the Ma brothers' garden. And even the old hermit Tao Qian, to whom offerings of yellow chrysanthemums and white wine are being made on this Double Nine festival, Quan says, seems on the evidence of his poetry to have sought comfort in chrysanthemums and wine only because the circumstances of his age offered him no acceptable alternative to a recluse life. However today, Quan goes on, the empire is at peace and enjoys high prosperity, so those of us who are devoted to literature and learning can enjoy them to the full, in complete tranquility.

I do not take that 'Preface' at face value, but I will come back to that later.

The Sixteen Personages of the Painting

The Ma brothers, hosts to the literary gathering in their Garden of Temporary Retreat, are Ma Yueguan (1688-1755) and Ma Yuelu (1697-after 1766). They were wealthy Anhui salt merchants whose family was then in its third generation of residence in Yangzhou.⁴⁸ Both of the Ma brothers were noted as scholars and poets, collectors of art and antiquities, and as bibliophiles. Above all they were known as generous hosts to impecunious scholars and litterateurs who were welcomed into their great library, housed, made guests of the family for months and years at a time. Their private library was among the half-dozen best, sometimes said to be the finest collection in China north of the Yangtze. The library was located within their lavish principal residence, inside the city, on the street leading to the Tianning Gate beyond which lay their elegant little garden retreat. The garden was noted for the austerity of its decor and the simplicity of its architecture. Quan stresses the theme of its 'purity' in his 'Preface'.

When the Ma brothers travelled to scenic or historic sites in the lower Yangtze region they took along poet-scholar friends to write poems with them, commemorating their experiences. Their published works consist in large part of such poems.⁴⁹ Ma Yuelu was among the 267 scholars of the realm recommended to sit for the special civil service examination for advanced scholars in 1736, the first year of the Qianlong reign. It was one of the new emperor's first gestures designed to win the good will of the scholars and potential bureaucrats. Nomination by a provincial governor or other high official was considered to be a great honor. Ma Yuelu declined the invitation, as did about one hundred others. That self-imposed detachment from government is evident throughout this group of sixteen persons in the painting. We must ask why that is so.

Two others in the painting, Quan Zuwang and Li E, also were recommended for that special examination in 1736. Quan however passed the regular *jinshi* examination earlier in the spring of 1736 and therefore was declared ineligible for the more honorific special examination. He had not expected that disqualification; there has been speculation that he had offended someone high in government. He took a post assigned to him in the Hanlin Academy, but within a year was ignominiously demoted to a magistracy in the provinces, again probably because he was considered to be too outspoken. He resigned at that time and never held civil service office again. He lacked independent means, so that generous patronage of the Ma brothers helped to make possible his distinguished life in scholarship. He was dependent on them and other Yangzhou patrons for much of the period from 1739-1748, and remained close to them until his early death in 1755.

Quan's close friend and fellow provincial Li E made a technical error in writing his examination papers so was eliminated in the special examination. He too avoided official life thereafter. A third scholar who frequented the Ma household, Hang Shijun (1696-1773) and a close intellectual associate of Li and Quan also was among those recommended for the special examination in 1736, and one of the fifteen who passed, placing fifth. His name appears with great frequency in the Ma brothers' poetry collections as a guest and intellectual friend, but he was away in Beijing in the fall of 1743 taking another special examination, this time for prestigious appointment to the Censorate. The essays he wrote for this examination offended the supervising officials, perhaps because in one of them he urged that more Chinese be appointed to high office.⁵⁰ He resigned and although poor never took office again. Like others from Hangzhou, he was an important figure in the Yangzhou intellectual community; later, in the 1760s he headed the Anding Academy there.

Of the sixteen persons depicted in the painting, only three held the *jinshi* degree. They are Quan Zuwang and two elderly former Hanlin academicians, Tang Jianzhong (1713) and the man playing the ancient lute (*qin*), and Cheng Mengxing (1712). Six of the sixteen are from Anhui merchant families. Three of the party are natives of Yangzhou prefecture. Three are literary figures from Hangzhou and nearby places in northern Zhejiang (in addition to Quan Zuwang and Li E, already mentioned, this trio also includes a rather well-known poet, Chen Zhang), and one is from Suzhou. In addition to the Ma brothers at least four others in the painting owned famous Yangzhou gardens. Several combined the roles of merchant and man of learning; both roles, in the eighteenth century, could

have given them access to government careers. Biographies of all sixteen appear in local gazetteers. Ten of the sixteen also appear in what we may call 'national biographies,' collections of biographies of persons nationally known. The painting thus depicts an elite gathering by any of several criteria except that of prominence in government.

One very obvious level of meaning in the painting and in its literary prefaces is that the Ma brothers did not wish to be associated with the vulgar ostentation that had made some of the leading salt merchants ludicrous figures. The *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* (1795) by Li Dou, referred to above, contains all-too-much amused if disdainful description of nouveau riche excesses committed by some merchants, and it has sometimes been noted that the Anhui merchants were more spendthrift than their northern competitors from Shanxi. The Ma brothers were among those Anhui merchants who indeed used their wealth lavishly but without vulgarity. The painting and its prefaces can, at one quite valid level of its meaning, be read as a statement setting the ideals of this group of rich men, and the poetry association whose gathering is depicted, quite apart from all modes of vulgar excess. The focus on refinement at the very least establishes a reason for this gathering and, it may have been hoped, no other reason need be sought.

My point however is that more than rejection of Yangzhou merchant vulgarity, and possibly more than mere detachment from politics is evident here: a clear note of disaffection, more than mere detachment from politics, may be the thread running through the lives of these persons. The occasion of the gathering, the painting depicting it, and the colophon and preface for it written by Li E and Quan Zuwang give evidence of that disaffection, however subtly indicated. The choice of Tao Qian (Yuanming, 365-427)⁵¹ as the past worthy to be honored on this Double Nine festival seems to hold special meaning. Tao can be associated quite readily with the fall season because of his many poetic references to chrysanthemums. Still, his poetry collection includes only two poems on the theme of this particular festival, so it is by no means inevitable to associate him specially with the Double Nine; the choice was a deliberate one. Tao's spirit may have seemed especially appropriate to the Ma brothers and their guests on this occasion because he symbolized a number of cultural values that they admired. Tao was above all the poet of the simple bucolic life. In one of his writings he created the enduring image of the Peach Blossom Spring, a stream leading through blooming peach trees into a hidden pure retreat from the dusty world of debased politics. Another poem known to everyone, called in translation *Home Again* (*Guiqulai Ci*), justifies his decision to leave office after a brief

try at being a public official, renouncing emolument and status, to live an unencumbered life of poverty and freedom. Richard Barnhart has explored all these themes in relation to painting in the beautiful catalog of the Metropolitan Museum exhibition called *Peach Blossom Spring*.⁵² Tao's poems idealize the alternative to office, status and wealth, and have often been invoked by frustrated would-be officials who could find in them comfort to compensate for their frustrations. Those values in Tao's poetry and the ideals associated with him appear to have had special meaning for the sponsors of this gathering, and probably for many intellectuals in the Qianlong period.

As described in Quan Zuwang's 'Preface' the Ma brothers' simple and small garden, a realm of purity adjacent to yet away from a noisy dirty world, may also have symbolized something else that was sometimes associated with Tao Qian – the rejection of the political order as unworthy of a high-minded person's loyalty. To be sure, loyalty to the Eastern Jin dynasty which fell to the brief Liu Song dynasty in 419, eight years before Tao's death in 427, was not really the reason why Tao became a recluse rather than serve a usurping dynasty, for he retired from public life in 404, long before the fall of the Jin. Yet in succeeding centuries it was widely believed that it was either that concept of loyalty to the previous dynasty, or rejection of the government of whatever dynasty as unworthy, that forced him in Confucian responsibility to reject public service. Throughout Neo-Confucian times high-minded recluses wrote poems expressing admiration of Tao, the model for their rejection of service to debased government.⁵³ So far, I have not been able to find a poem by Quan written for this Double Nine literary gathering. He was not present, but he might have been expected to add a poem to the others, to complete the collection of poems by the persons in the painting. If there was one, it seems not to have been preserved. So we have only his 'Preface' by which to judge his responses to that occasion. There is much evidence that he was often rashly outspoken and that he wrote things that might have run afoul of the Qianlong literary inquisition. By the time his collected works were posthumously published, in 1804, the Qianlong Emperor was dead and the atmosphere had changed. Even so, it has been speculated that those writings had been carefully expurgated by his friends and literary executor to remove offending material. Quan was at the very least passively disaffected, and quite possibly so critical of the Qing that he could have been considered disloyal.⁵⁴

To return then to his 'Preface' of 1746, written for the painting of the 1743 gathering, he concludes it by comparing the troubled conditions of the fourth and fifth centuries with the happy age in which he lived. What

does that mean? It very clearly was *not* a happy age for Quan, frustrated in his career, critical of the government. We may regard his praise of the Qing dynasty as no more than the requisite formal obeisance, not his genuine sentiment. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that he was not among fellow spirits, or that any of those present held the dynasty in warm regard. Possibly, such formulaic praise of the regime was expected to be read by his friends and fellow spirits as a gesture of cynicism.

Quan Zuwang and the Qing Literary Inquisition

Among the sixteen eminent persons in the painting, Quan Zuwang is, I believe, our most important key to an understanding of the Qianlong Emperor's impact on his age. Control over the minds of the Chinese came to be a ruling obsession of the Manchu despot. Quan was the kind of person seen by him and by the emperor's sycophantish close associates as potentially dangerous. Quan considered himself a follower of the great seventeenth-century historian Huang Zongxi; he placed himself in the tradition of philosophical-minded concern for history represented by Huang. Quan seems to have been fascinated by the problem of loyalty as revealed by the actions of men in times of political and social stress, and he wrote short pungent essays analyzing the attitudes and the social import of historic figures faced with such problems. A number of his subjects were persons from the Yuan dynasty caught in the turmoil of that alien regime's fall and the Ming dynasty's founding. But he was even more absorbed in the lives and deaths of Ming personages caught up in the Ming-Qing transition, just a century before the gathering in the Ma brothers' little garden. The fall of the Ming was still thought of as a deeply disturbing event of the recent past, one most difficult to write about.

In the painting Quan sits on a wooden drum stool, the fifth figure from the right-hand edge, leaning his right elbow on a table-like rock while stroking his sparse beard (Figure 4). He appears to be totally at ease, even idyllically happy, as do all the figures in the painting. How should we read this painting? The persons in it were drawn by the craftsman-portraitist Ye Fanglin. The garden scene – we would call it the background – was painted by the landscape artist, a literatus named Fang Shishu whose family were Anhui merchants. Ye omits himself from the gathering, but places Fang seated fourth from the right, holding a paper as if to read a poem; he is a peer of the other notables. It is the garden as he has painted it that carries the more important artistic message. For the figures and faces are merely skillful and ingratiating likenesses, not



Figure 4. 'Portrait of Quan Zuwang,' detail from Fang Shishu and Ye Fanglin, *The Ninth-Day Literary Gathering at Xingan*. Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art (79.72), The Severance and Greta Millikin Fund.

penetrating studies in the psychology of the sitters. In this, the Chinese approach to the group portrait here, by a master painter aided by the competent craftsman-collaborator, is the opposite of what was usual in seventeenth or eighteenth-century Europe, where backgrounds were filled in by studio assistants and the master painter did the faces and hands. We might be guided by that observation to seek the more direct meaning of this painting in the depiction of the garden and not in the portraiture. Fang Shishu's depiction of a real garden bears symbolic meaning. In the graphic medium it matches the conception offered by Quan Zuwang in his literary preface. That is how to read this painting.

Quan appears in the painting sitting contentedly among a group of fellow spirits enjoying a peaceful afternoon of cultivated pleasures. But, it has been argued here that those appearances are deceptive. We can show that several leading figures among them were politically disaffected. I will hypothesize that all of them shared in some measure the growing cynicism of the mid-Qing elite, and that Quan, in particular, was courting disaster by his behavior in Yangzhou in these years. It is hard to imagine that the things he said and wrote about the Ming loyalists who resisted the Qing conquest, most particularly at Yangzhou in 1645, would not have drawn the ire of the Qianlong Emperor and his inquisitors. Quan escaped. Perhaps his having married the daughter of a Manchu literatus in some measure shielded him from scrutiny prior to his early death. He died of an illness at the age of fifty, in 1755, a third of the way through the Qianlong reign's increasingly rabid suppression of real and imagined dissent. Quan's idealization of the heroic anti-Qing resistance is a more blatant 'crime' than those for which many others died; that is no doubt a principal reason for his friends and literary executors having held back his literary works, arranging for their publication only in the reign of the Qianlong Emperor's successor early in the next century.

Shi Kefa, the martyr of the Yangzhou resistance in 1645, was a difficult topic for the Qing authorities. On the first of his six great inspection tours of the south, in 1684, the Kangxi Emperor pointedly avoided Yangzhou, probably fearful of arousing some expression of the lingering resentment. The official dynastic history of the Ming, after decades of uncertainty and delay in the handling of sensitive issues, finally was accepted by the throne for publication in 1736, the first year of the Qianlong reign, and after a final round of revisions was published in 1739. Its biography of Shi Kefa (*juan* 274) is long and laudatory. It praises Shi as a brave and loyal servant of a state whose mandate was gone and whose fate a few upright gentlemen could not reverse. That is in the tradition of a new dynasty's obligation to honor the loyal servants of the old dynasty, even those who have opposed it valiantly in warfare. The Qing was forced to be magnanimous by honoring Shi Kefa, but the gesture probably rang hollow in Yangzhou ears. It appeared to be a way of emphasizing an aspect of the conquest that showed it in a good light, while suppressing all references to the massacre that followed Shi's death. Later in his reign the Qianlong Emperor went so far as to award Shi Kefa a posthumous title, calling him the 'Loyal and Upright,' *Zhongzheng*. Those qualities had made Shi resist against hopeless odds; they should now impel all Chinese to support the Manchu rulers. Shi's fast commitment to those virtues made him prefer death to surrender. Knowing the defenses of Yangzhou were at the point of collapse, Shi asked his associates to bury him at Plum Blossom Ridge outside the western gates of the city. Later, his body could not be found but his court robes and cap and other personal belongings were entombed there. The place became an important new shrine of local and even of national importance.

The Plum Blossom Academy, dating from Ming times, was extensively rebuilt on Plum Blossom Ridge in 1734 with contributions from Ma Yueguan.⁵⁵ It was very close to the Ma brothers' little Garden of Temporary Retreat depicted in the painting of 1743. In the text of his memoir (*ji*) recording a visit to Plum Blossom Ridge with Yangzhou friends, as it now appears in his collected writings, Quan Zuwang has avoided all reference to the most sensitive issue – the massacre that followed Shi's death. Yet his rashness is nonetheless evident. He says in this memoir that when he led this group of friends to honor Shi's spirit at the shrine of the heroic martyr, he recounted for them Shi Kefa's last words and 'there were none among his hearers whose tears did not fall like rain.' Any focus on the righteous spirit of anti-Manchu resistance, even in this early phase of the Qianlong reign, was dangerous. More pointedly, as recorded in this memoir, Quan's account of Shi's death disagreed with the laundered version set forth in the newly-published official *Ming History*. In that we read:

Two days later the armies of the Great Qing dynasty reached the city's walls; artillery fire breached walls at the northwest corner and the city then fell. Shi Kefa slashed his throat but did not die. An adjutant general helped him to leave by the Small East Gate, but he was then taken captive. He called out boldly: 'I am Commander Shi,' and thereupon was killed.⁵⁶

Quan adopted a different account, agreeing with Ming loyalist writings from the mid-seventeenth century, writings on which he was the leading specialist and some of which had already been the cause of an intimidating suppression of historians in 1713. Quan's account of Shi Kefa's death continues to present the different version. His memoir states:

On the twenty-fifth day [of the fourth month], the city fell. The Loyal Martyr [using Shi's posthumous honorific title] drew his sword and slashed himself. His staff generals rushed forward to protect and support him. The Loyal Martyr called loudly for Shi Dewei, but Dewei's tears flowed and he could not bring himself to take the blade [and complete the suicide]. The generals then supporting him led him away. When they arrived at the Small East Gate the Great Army's soldiers swarmed toward them. Assistant Commissioner Ma Minglu, the Prefect Ren Minyu, Military Vice-commissioner Liu Zhaoji and others all died there. The Loyal Martyr looked steadfastly forward and said: 'I am Grand Secretary and Minister Shi.' He was then taken captive and led to the South Gate. There...the Prince of Yu [Dodo] addressed him as 'master' and urged him to surrender. The Loyal Martyr upbraided him, and died....⁵⁷

In the possibly altered form in which we now read Quan's memoir, this account does not repeat the exchange between Shi and Dodo in which Shi says he is prepared to die, but that the people of Yangzhou must be spared further hardship. Nor does it say that when Dodo raised his sword to kill Shi, Shi's attendants took the blows to shield Shi, earning Dodo's praise for their courage, before Dodo's attendants then killed them all and hacked Shi's corpse to pieces. But it clearly reminds the reader of all those facts, and unequivocally states that Dodo spoke to Shi before his death. The clear implication is that Dodo ordered his death. Here sequence can only be consequence, even though the neutral word 'died' is used instead of 'was killed'. Shi thus was not killed by some unidentified soldier, as the *Ming History* states; Quan places that responsibility on the Manchu Prince, fifteenth son of Nurhaci, brother of prince Regent Dorgon, and uncle of the child Shunzhi Emperor. And, by maintaining the accuracy of that version of the events, with Shi's plea for the safety of the people, it reminds Yangzhou people of the terrible massacre of their city that immediately followed. The Qing court's purpose in honoring Shi was to draw attention to Manchu propriety in displaying respect for a man of

valor, and to deflect attention away from the unsavory aspects of the same events. Quan's retelling of the events, even reminding the reader that he took groups of Yangzhou citizens to the site and made stirring speeches about it, powerfully countered that Manchu purpose, and could scarcely have escaped being labelled as treason in the extreme phases of the Qianlong literary inquisition that lay just ahead.

On the other hand, Quan was an intellectual deeply interested in the historical truth; he was not a political agitator, nor should this suggest that the poetry society meeting that day in a Yangzhou garden was a conspiratorial organization, nurturing covert sedition. By my cursory reading of the two Ma brothers' poetry collections, most of their poetry is insipid. It is mostly occasional poetry, full of friendship and shared associations, but virtually devoid of other content. Nonetheless one must conclude that they took very seriously their roles as collectors and preservers of civilization's heritage, and as patrons and true friends of the eminent talents of their time, men who were, like themselves, totally vulnerable in the face of a government they could not respect, and had growing reasons to fear. Together the impecunious geniuses and the rich men of culture celebrated the enduring values, while helping each other survive. The simple little garden occupying a site rich in historical associations to which they often went for tranquil afternoons of poetry and wine may well have been the most meaningful symbol of their search for purity in an unclean world, as Quan's 'Preface' strongly suggests.

The Garden Theme in Literature and Painting

During those same years in the middle of the eighteenth century, one of the greatest products of Chinese civilization was taking form. It is the novel *Honglou Meng* (translated as *The Story of the Stone* and as *Dream of the Red Chamber*). Its author, Cao Zhan, died in 1763, just twenty years after *The Ninth-Day Literary Gathering at Xingan* was painted. The Cao family had some associations with Yangzhou, but more important ones with Nanjing and Beijing. The novel depicts life in a fantasized garden of physical and spiritual purity, a place apart from the dirty world. I do not believe that garden was inspired by one of the famous gardens of Yangzhou, nor even one of those in Nanjing or Beijing. Yu Ying-shih's interpretation of it as a wholly imaginary garden of the mind is completely convincing. The garden of the novel was one into which the politically and emotionally disaffected Cao Zhan could escape from the hypocrisy, corruption and danger of elite life in the Qianlong reign. In his book *Honglou Meng di Liangge Shijie* ('The Two Worlds of *The Dream of Red*

Chamber') Yu shows that not only the author, whose highly-placed family in the Banner elite had fallen from grace and who suffered poverty and hardship, felt deep resentment against the dynasty, but also that his close friends within the imperial clan itself boldly expressed similar feelings.⁵⁸ As Manchu or Chinese Bannermen they were not subject to the full rigors of the literary inquisition and surveillance that ordinary Chinese had to bear, so could express what others normally suppressed. Yu Ying-shih's discussion of this adds greatly to our awareness of the specific content and quality of the elite alienation in Qianlong times. We must assume that the Ma brothers and their Yangzhou circle of intellectuals and rich merchants could not have escaped the influence of that widespread disaffection. Moreover we can see that they had their own direct and immediate reasons for being at least resentful and cynical, if not really conspiratorial.

On the one hand, their wealth drew the corrupt and the degenerate within government, for assignment to Yangzhou could quickly make a bureaucrat rich. It was expensive and, for some, painful to survive in that atmosphere. But the personality and the behavior of the Qianlong Emperor himself probably was the last straw for those who had to entertain him on his Southern Tours, where he expressed his avarice, falseness and pomposity to them quite directly. After his first tour in 1751 Ma Yueguan was 'privileged' to go to the capital to offer felicitations to the emperor's mother, toward whom the emperor displayed obsessive devotion.⁵⁹ The cost of the gifts with which rich merchants were obliged to express their felicitations was very great; the trinkets received in return were contemptible.⁶⁰ Shortly after the emperor's second visit, in 1757, he decided that that area around the Tianning Temple would make a more suitable Temporary Palace for his future visits (Figure 5). That area marked out for rebuilding in lavish style, paid for by the Yangzhou merchant community, included the Ma brothers' Garden of Temporary Retreat, the locus of the Literary Gathering of 1743. He simply expropriated the entire area. He had also looked about the gardens and homes of his Yangzhou hosts and had indicated certain items that he would be happy to receive, for Beijing, or for his Imperial Villa, Yu Huayuan, as the Temporary Palace was designated. One of the sixteen persons in the painting of the Literary Gathering owned the famous Garden of Nine Peaks (*Jiufeng Yuan*). The 'peaks' were miniature mountains of intricately weathered and shaped stones, and had been assembled by the great seventeenth-century painter Daoji, also famed as a designer of gardens. The emperor took a fancy to two of the Nine Peaks; we do not know whether the rich merchant owner, after joyously donating them, then changed the name of his garden, or found two less famous replace-

ments.⁶¹ The pattern of intimidation becomes still clearer in the decade or two following the deaths of the Ma brothers in 1755 and 1766. A great friend of the Ma brothers was Lu Jianzeng (1690-1768) who served as Lianghuai Salt Commissioner, supposedly the government's watchdog in Yangzhou, for a year in 1737-1738, and again for ten years 1753-1762. He was a scholar-poet from Shandong. Some years after his retirement, he was involved in a scandal from his days in office at Yangzhou, charged with having taken bribes to permit the salt merchants to underreport what they owed to the government. According to the charges against him he himself had received bribes of rather insignificant amount, given the scale of normal salt 'business'; but the amount said to be owed the government was ten million taels. He and several associates were jailed. He died in jail; others were tried and beheaded. Officials at court had tried to protect him, but the machinery of intimidation would not be stopped in this case. The heirs of the Ma brothers, to whom Lu was so close, must have trembled. Another case that must have chilled the surviving members of their circle involved the eminent poet Shen Deqian (1673-1769). After Ma Yueguan's death in 1755 the Ma family asked Shen to edit his poetry for publication. He did so, and contributed prefaces to that and some of their other works. Shen had been specially honored by the Qianlong Emperor, even named tutor to the sons of the imperial clan. Yet in 1778, some years after Shen's death at age ninety-six in 1769, the capricious and ever-suspicious emperor thought he had discovered seditious sentiments in Shen's poetry, so ordered the works proscribed and all the old man's honors posthumously withdrawn.⁶² When Quan Zuwang died in 1755 the Ma family protected Quan's still unpublished literary collection and may have counselled the long delay in their publication to avoid the literary inquisition, then coming into its height.

As the reign of this willful, perverse emperor continued, the influence exerted by unworthy councillors increased, and the literary inquisition became more fearful, for in the hands of his servile agents the charges of sedition could be used to accomplish all manner of private ends. At the same time the ruler's avarice threatened all who owned things of beauty and of high value. Collectors are said to have had skilled copies of their best-known objects made so that if the emperor asked to see them, he might be gulled into demanding the copy thinking he had the original. That genuine connoisseurs despised him for his pompous ignorance seems well attested.⁶³

The intellectual climate in cities such as Yangzhou during the eighteenth century thus was in many ways impinged upon and threatened by the character of the Qianlong Emperor himself. The cultivated elite mostly

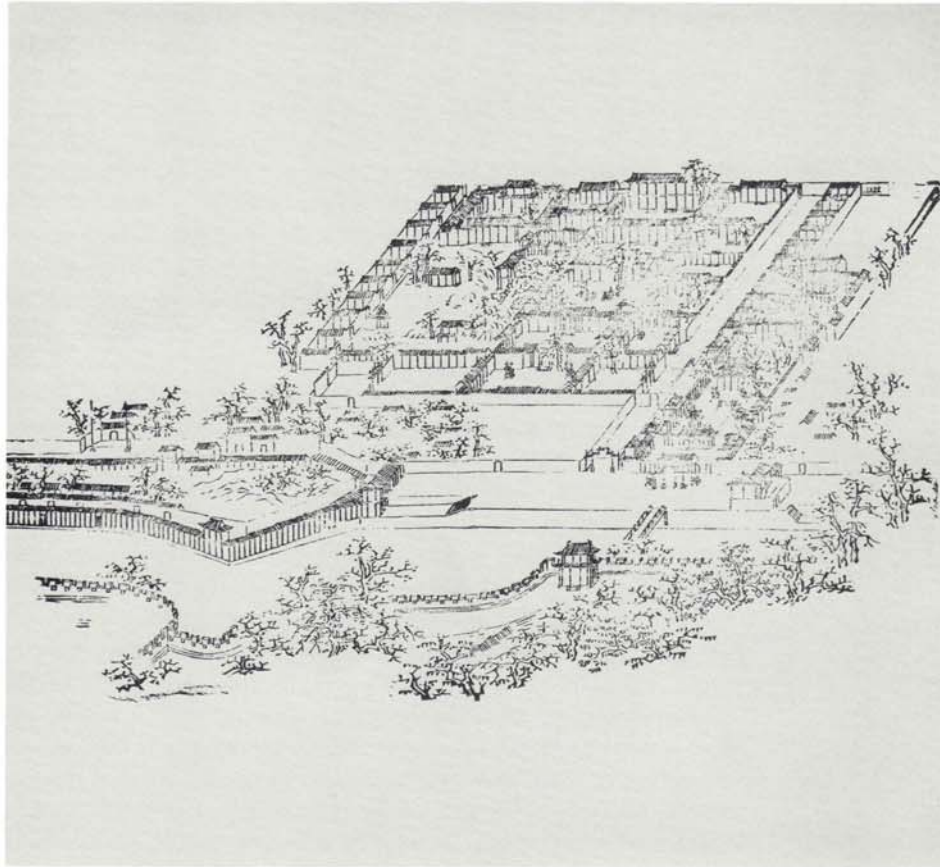


Figure 5. The Qianlong Emperor's Imperial Villa at Yangzhou. The northwest corner of the city wall is shown in the foreground; the villa, lying outside the city wall, occupied most of the grounds of a Buddhist temple compound. From Li Dou, *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* (1839 edition); courtesy of the Library of Congress.

managed to live with that influence, to detest it quietly while making the necessary bows in his direction, giving up money and objects when necessary, hoping that lightning would not strike them or their friends. The most saddening of the effects of his character on his age was that it turned many members of the elite, some of them talented and able, into sycophants and opportunists. The atmosphere was sullied by their behavior. It added painfully to the pollution from which the Ma brothers and their friends escaped to their pure, elegant gardens, their collections

of books and of paintings, and their interaction among like spirits. Their painting and poetry may not have reached the highest standards, but the meaning of their cultured lives for the preservation of Chinese civilization is nonetheless of high historical significance.

I accept the painting of *The Ninth-Day Literary Gathering at Xingan* as an important historical document. I have quoted Wai-kam Ho above in his summation of the painting's meaning. To repeat, in part, he wrote:

Within this enclosure, a special afternoon in eighteenth-century China was quietly celebrated by a group of friends whose subdued joy and contentment speak well of the character of that particular day...

I think we must add that this group of friends had found in this garden a way to maintain their commitment to their cultural values in a time when those were threatened. The history of their century shows that they did not wholly succeed. But there is perhaps more suppressed resentment, and more quiet valor in their 'subdued joy and contentment' than is immediately apparent. The garden's walls permitted their temporary retreat from a sullied world. They could neither flee from it entirely, nor express their resentment against it openly. In deeply felt and subtle ways, however, they sought to maintain their self-respect through shared rituals of truth and beauty.