

Painting and diplomacy at the Qianlong court

A commemorative picture by Wang Zhicheng (Jean-Denis Attiret)

LUCIA TRIPODES

It is hard to imagine a more meticulously structured picture than *Imperial Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees [Wanshu yuan]* (fig. 1). Painted on silk in a syncretic style that combines Chinese and European elements, it is a work of unusually impressive size, 221.2 x 419.6 cm. Its composition and general conception can be attributed to the French Jesuit court artist Jean-Denis Attiret (Wang Zhicheng, 1702–1780), while two other Jesuit painters, Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688/9–1766) and Ignace Sickelpart (Ai Qimeng, 1708–1780), together with other unidentified Chinese artists, helped bring the work to completion.¹

The purpose of this article is to raise some straightforward but detailed questions about the careful structure of this painting—not, perhaps, the most obvious angle of attack to take. Given the picture's overall imposing effect, would it not be more appropriate to inquire into the sheer propagandistic feat managed by the Jesuit artists on behalf of their imperial patron? The display of imperial authority was certainly paramount in the minds of the painting's creators. However, an attempt to come to terms with the degree of skill, ambiguity, and intensity with which the theme of the imperial banquet is visualized reveals the inadequacy of this characterization of the painting. My analysis here will pursue three main lines of inquiry, one having to do with the way we “read” the picture for its

most basic narrative information, another resting on matters of visual play and metaphor. But above all, the almost enthusiastic display of cunning artistic skill places the very commemoration of state authority at a certain remove, in a work that proclaims the unambiguous nature of that authority.

Commemoration

Who were the political actors in the Wanshu yuan banquet and where did they stand in relation to the Qing emperor in 1754? These questions place the inquiry within the larger field of Qing relations with Western Mongolia or Zungharia, a region of long-standing concern for the empire because of its khans' historical resistance to Qing overlordship. The situation was exacerbated after 1750, as political turmoil in the area caused various Western Mongolian tribes to flee their homeland and migrate eastwards into Qing territory. Many of these defectors sought protection from the Qianlong emperor, who in turn was eager to resettle the politically ravaged areas with Qing-appointed leaders (fig. 2). In 1753, three Dorbot princes led by Tseren (d. 1758) surrendered to the Qianlong Emperor, bringing with them some 3,000 families. Like other defectors who preceded and followed them, the Dorbots were seen as safe representatives of Qing interests. But whereas other Zunghar defectors turned against the Qing in the later 1750s during the Qing expansion into Western Mongolia, the Dorbots remained loyal. The Qing intervention in Mongolia marked a decisive step in the dynasty's pacification of Inner Asia, a goal that would eventually be achieved in 1760 through the annexation of a vast territory covering all of Western Mongolia and the oases of Eastern Turkestan. This newly acquired territory would be baptized Xinjiang or the New Territory.

Officially, the banquet that took place in the Wanshu yuan on July 5, 1754, honored an alliance between the Dorbots and the Qing empire, but this masked what was essentially an attempt to subjugate distinct, nomadic populations on Qing terms.

The author would like to thank Jonathan Hay for his assistance with the sinological aspects of this article.

1. Historic and iconographic information about this painting has been culled primarily from two sources: Yang Boda's extensive archival research and review of the Jesuits' correspondence, put forth in “Wanshu yuan xiyuan tu kaoxi (A Study of the Picture *Imperial Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees*),” in *Qing dai yuanyuanhua* (Court Painting of the Qing Dynasty) (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1993), pp. 178–210; and the exhibition catalog *Europa und die Kaiser von China 1240–1816* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1985). Yang Boda has effectively proven that *Imperial Banquet* depicts a reception for Dorbot leaders by citing court records stating that the three Mongol banquets of 1754–1755 were carried out seasonally, the Dorbot banquet taking place in summertime; in the painting, Yang observes, the emperor is wearing a distinctive summer hat.

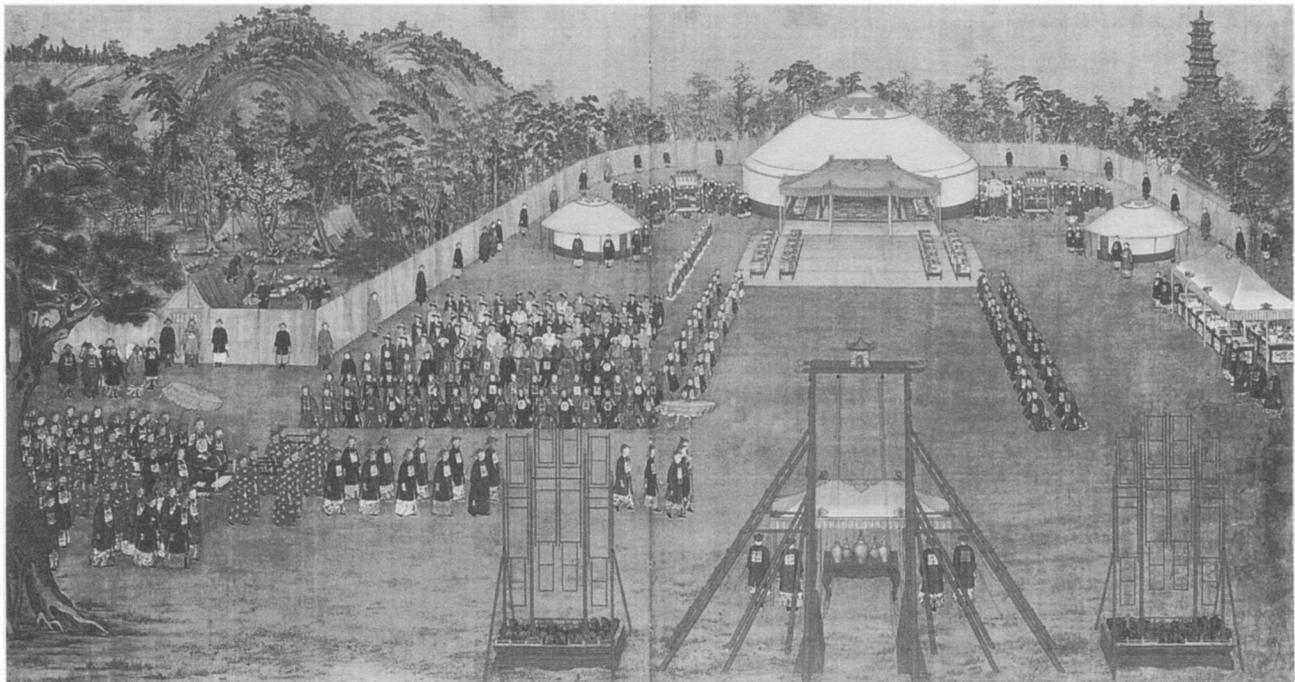


Figure 1. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees*, 1755. Hanging scroll, gilding and mineral pigment on silk, H: 221.2 cm, W: 419.6 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Covering a full eleven days, the ritual festivities included eight banquet meals, of which the depicted banquet is one or, more likely, an imagined composite version. High-ranking Dorbots were assigned official Qing titles and gifts were exchanged between the emperor and the three Dorbot princes led by Tseren. The occasion involved entertainment, spectacle as well as ceremony, featuring exhibitions of wrestling, horsemanship exercises, and acrobatics. It was not every day that the Qing put on such a show. The artist depicts what purports to be one moment in the long succession of events that comprised the overall ritual. That hypothetical moment encapsulates the most important symbolic aspects of the various ceremonies, while producing a complex but unified composition and a sense of the all-out sumptuousness of Qing hospitality.

The painting is packed with narrative information. The central scene takes place within an enclosed arena marked off by a cloth wall along which attendants are stationed. Within the wall, a large tent (*jurte*) is equipped inside and out with low banquet tables and with the emperor's throne, which is one point of focus

in the painting; two other tents, smaller in size, stand on either side. At the extreme left and right, respectively, are seen the food preparation area outside the partition and a stall containing imperial gifts on the margin of the enclosed area. At the very front of the picture are three structures for use in acrobatics and a table arranged with a number of decanters, on either side of which stand two Qing officials. The left half of the painting depicts organized rows of Qing princes and high civil and military officers, as well as Dorbot tribesmen and a handful of Dorbot officials attired in Qing uniform, all standing at attention as the Qianlong Emperor enters the scene at the lower left.

The figures within the enclosure are organized as follows. On either side of the large *jurte* are shown members of the ritual imperial orchestra, attired in red garments and carrying several varieties of instruments. Below them, on the left, is a single row of 11 Lamas in their characteristic red and yellow robes and broad hats (probably Mongolian Hutuktu). A wide pathway leading to the banquet tent is established with two double rows of important Qing personages, imperial relatives, and

high civil and military officials. At the very top of these rows, nearest the tent, are three high-ranking Lamas. The left-hand row continues at the bottom into the rectangular aggregate of figures at the left, composed (bottom to top) of Qing officials (first two rows), fifteen Dorbot commanders including the three princes (third row), and Mongol officials of middling and low rank (back five rows). The fifteen Dorbots are themselves organized in descending rank right to left, starting with the princes. Tseren (Chinese: Cheling) (56 years old) appears at the far right, wearing four dragon medallions on his breast plate; Cheling Wubashi (25 years old) is next to him with a matching set of medallions, while Cheling Mengke is at the far left, wearing only two medallions. In front of this ranked rectangular grouping of figures, the imperial procession proceeds rightwards from the painting's edge. At the head of the procession, three Qing military personages carrying a canopy have reached the threshold of the pathway leading to the tent. The emperor is borne on a litter, and above him is a canopy and tree foliage overlapping the left border.

The bird's-eye view plays up the banquet's geographical locale, which had particular relevance for Qing–Mongolian relations. The Park of Ten Thousand Trees lay within the Bishu shanzhuang (Mountain Hamlet to Flee Summer Heat), the Qing summer residence built by the Kangxi emperor at Chengde, some 190 kilometers northeast of Beijing. The flatland of the Park of Ten Thousand Trees functioned as a combination of retreat and diplomatic center, where the imperial court received homage from its Mongolian and Turkic underlords, in a setting that simulated the naturally wooded terrain of the steppes; under Kangxi's grandson, Qianlong, it eventually came to include reproductions of two Tibetan temples. The Wanshu yuan symbolically appropriated Inner Asian polities, even as it promoted a pan-national image for the Qing. The Bishu shanzhuang, however, was made up primarily of 36 scenic views that evoked a southern Chinese landscape. The views called attention to particular aspects of the landscaping, such as the 65-meter-high, nine-tiered pagoda of the Yongyou temple, built between 1754 and 1764. The pagoda can be seen in the upper right corner of the banquet painting and is echoed compositionally in the upper left by two pavilions belonging to the Bishu shanzhuang (which are rather hard to make out). Though topographical, the painting is far from transcriptive. As pointed out by Yang Boda, two geographical features of the Bishu



Figure 2. "A [Western Mongolian] Prince of the Region of Tili," from *Huang Qing zhigong tu* (Depictions of Tribute-bearers to the Imperial Qing), 1761, juan 2 (Liao Fan shushe reprint, 1991).

shanzhuang have been edited out: a miniature garden mountain in the northwest region of the imperial estate and another in the northeast, which would otherwise have appeared on the left and right sides, respectively, of the great tent.

The palaces, gardens, and hunting parks of the summer residence were much commemorated in poetry and painting. In 1711, for example, Shen Yu, a member of Kangxi's Grand Secretariat, painted a series of pictures based on the *Thirty-Six Views of Jehol*, an engraved version of which was subsequently printed. And the Chinese court artist Leng Mei painted an overall representation of the Bishu shanzhuang



Figure 3. Leng Mei, *An Overall View of Bishu shanzhuang*, circa 1721–1723. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, H: 254.8 cm, W: 172.5 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

sometime between 1721 and 1723, entitled *An Overall View of Bishu shanzhuang* (fig. 3). Other paintings, such as the 1741 *Troating for Deer*, discussed by Dorothy Berinstein in this volume, commemorate hunting activities at the Mulan Hunting Grounds. *Imperial Banquet* belongs to this topographical and commemorative tradition.

As reconstructed by Yang Boda, the process from initial command to the completion of *Imperial Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* presents obvious, if mundane, evidence of the seriousness accorded to painting during the Qianlong reign. The archives of the Painting Academy indicate that the emperor ordered Attiret (Wang Zhicheng) to go to Chengde on June 26, 1754.² In a letter dated October 17, 1754, Père Amiot (Qian Deming) relates that on that day (June 26), Attiret left Peking for Chengde and stayed there for a total of 50 days, 40 of which were spent painting. While on call, Attiret was apparently closely involved in the ceremonies and had one two-hour portrait session with the emperor, in addition to executing portraits of important Qing and Mongol officials. The portraits would subsequently be copied into the banquet picture (figs. 4–5).³ Amiot mentions that Attiret did a draft of a ceremonial painting and then returned to Peking because he fell sick. The official commission for the painting was not announced until one year later, on the ninth day of the fifth (Chinese) month, 1755 (June 18). In the interim, a winter banquet took place at Chengde to honor yet another set of Mongol leaders who had surrendered to the Qing in

1754.⁴ The winter banquet was also to be commemorated in painting⁵ (fig. 6) and so required a preliminary trip to Chengde to document the ceremonial occasion. In this case, a number of Jesuit painters made the trip. The two banquet pictures were commissioned together to hang opposite one another in the Juana shengjing Hall at Bishu shanzhuang; the commission was occasioned by the seemingly successful conclusion of the diplomatic campaign.

Once the commissions were given, production time for both paintings was unusually short, only one month, 17 days, indicating perhaps that they were needed for show at another, upcoming celebration, possibly that marking the defeat of the Zunghar empire and the submission of Western Mongolia in March of 1755.⁶ In any case, there were good reasons for finishing quickly, since in their intended location the two banquet paintings would be viewed by khans and princes from the Inner Asian steppes. Politics being volatile in that region, it was important to publicize the defections of 1754 as soon as possible, so that hold-out resisters might be persuaded to give up. The paintings remained on view for several years until 1761, when the eunuch Hu Shijie suggested to the emperor that the earlier paintings be replaced by illustrations of poems. Hu's advice was well taken: events of the later 1750s had erased the diplomatic successes commemorated in the paintings and rendered the latter an embarrassment.

Although the inscription on the painting has been damaged, it has been shown, on the basis of Père Amiot's correspondence and court archives, that Attiret was the artist responsible for the work. It is likely, however, that other Jesuit painters and Chinese court artists took part in the work, as was common for such large projects.⁷ Overall, two things stand out in the

2. For information on the Jesuit painter Attiret, see Veronika Veit, "Jean-Denis Attiret, Ein Jesuitenmaler am Hofe Qianlongs," in *Europa und die Kaiser von China 1240–1816* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1985), pp. 144–155. Considering the degree of control Attiret was granted in this project, it would be useful to consider his artistic training and background in France. Unfortunately, such information is sparse. Nevertheless, it is tempting to speculate on what seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France might have brought to bear on court painting and even on court ritual through the influence of a French Jesuit painter. It is worth noting the Qing court's avid interest in theatrical illusion and public spectacle, which were similarly being developed in Rome and Versailles.

3. The number and mode of production of the portrait heads remain somewhat of a mystery. Yang Boda claims that 22 portraits were made (started and completed?) at Chengde, leading one to believe that Attiret was solely responsible for them, as he seems to have been the only European painter on hand. On the other hand, the German catalog claims that 53 portraits were made, though it does not specify where, when, and by whom.

4. Three such banquets—or banquet series, since they included a number of dinners—were held at Chengde between 1754 and 1755 to commemorate ententes with various Mongol leaders. The winter banquet of 1754 honored the Zungharian leader Amursana, who would later betray the Qing, as well as Banzhul of the Heshuote tribe and Namoku of the Dorbot.

5. The so-called *Horsemanship* painting depicts Mongol leaders standing by as Qing banner troops perform horsemanship exercises for the new vassals and the Qianlong court.

6. To commemorate this event, the Puning temple at Chengde was built.

7. Yang Boda suggests that the now-destroyed inscription would have given sole credit to Castiglione (as does the related winter banquet painting) because of the latter's status as senior Jesuit artist at the Qing court.



Figure 4. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, portraits of the Dorbots), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

production process: the intense pace of Attiret's work in Chengde and the division of labor within the Academy. Although it was felt necessary for Attiret to attend the events in person, it was always known that the painting would be a workshop affair, with work parceled out to specialists and apprentices. If the summer banquet painting documented the empire's progress towards domination of its Inner Asian neighbors, it was also, as I will shortly discuss, a kind of ideal embodiment of Qing power. The production process, with its complex distribution of labor among court painters, silk weavers, mounters, and those responsible for them, matched the rituals of July 1754 in terms of both level of complexity and precise staging of events.

Qing imperial ritual

The almost contemporary *Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing* (*Da Qing tongli*) (1756) describes a

variety of ceremonial occasions: sacrifices, addresses to the imperial retinue and the presentation of memorials to the emperor, martial rites, guest rites, and funeral rites.⁸ Guest rites (*bin li*) cover the emperor's relation to outer lords and, more generally, to all

8. Information on Qing ritual has been taken from several sources: Sven Hedin, *Jehol, City of Emperors*, trans. E. G. Nash (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1933); James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995); id., "Lamas, Emperors, and Rituals: Political Implications in Qing Imperial Ceremonies," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 16, no. 2 (1993):243–277; id., "A Multitude of Lords: Qing Court Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793," *Late Imperial China* 10, no. 2 (1989):72–105; Angela Zito, "The Imperial Birthday: Ritual Encounters between the Panchen Lama and the Qianlong Emperor in 1780" (Paper read at the Conference on State and Ritual in East Asia, Paris, 1995, sponsored by the College de France and Columbia University).



Figure 5. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, portraits of the Emperor), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

peoples contained by the empire. This is the category to which the Wanshu yuan banquet for the Dorbot leaders can be ascribed. The much later but still relevant *Institutes and Precedents of the Great Qing* (1899) distinguishes 18 forms of military ritual occasion, one of which, the “holding [of] banquets and granting rewards upon report of a victory,”⁹ comes close to describing the conditions of the Chelings banquet, as the commemorated event was in part a military maneuver. James Hevia has argued in his work on Qing guest ritual that official visits to the emperor were structured through a distinction between initiating and completing acts.¹⁰ As mediator between

Heaven and Earth, the Qianlong Emperor completed or realized the order of Heaven, while generating actions and models for emulation by his subjects. By contrast, in their relations to the emperor, all persons were at the receiving end of his wishes. This relation of power was realized in ritual by treating the emperor (his body, specifically) as center, focus, and *raison d'être* of all activities. The emperor's own actions in relation to everyone else's were few, but they commanded a panoply of preparations and responses on the part of the imperial subjects. Mediating this apparent one-sidedness, however, were certain rewards granted to the submissive party. In short, the latter was granted *through* his ritual subordination the particular power of realizing the emperor's wishes by enforcing them on others. Also, the ritual conferred status on the foreign lord by incorporating him into the Qing power structure, which the ritual as a whole was seen to symbolize. In the case of Qing policy towards the

9. Taken from Joanna Waley-Cohen, “Commemorating War in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30, part 4 (1996): 869–899.

10. See James Hevia, “A Multitude of Lords” and *Cherishing Men from Afar* (see note 8).

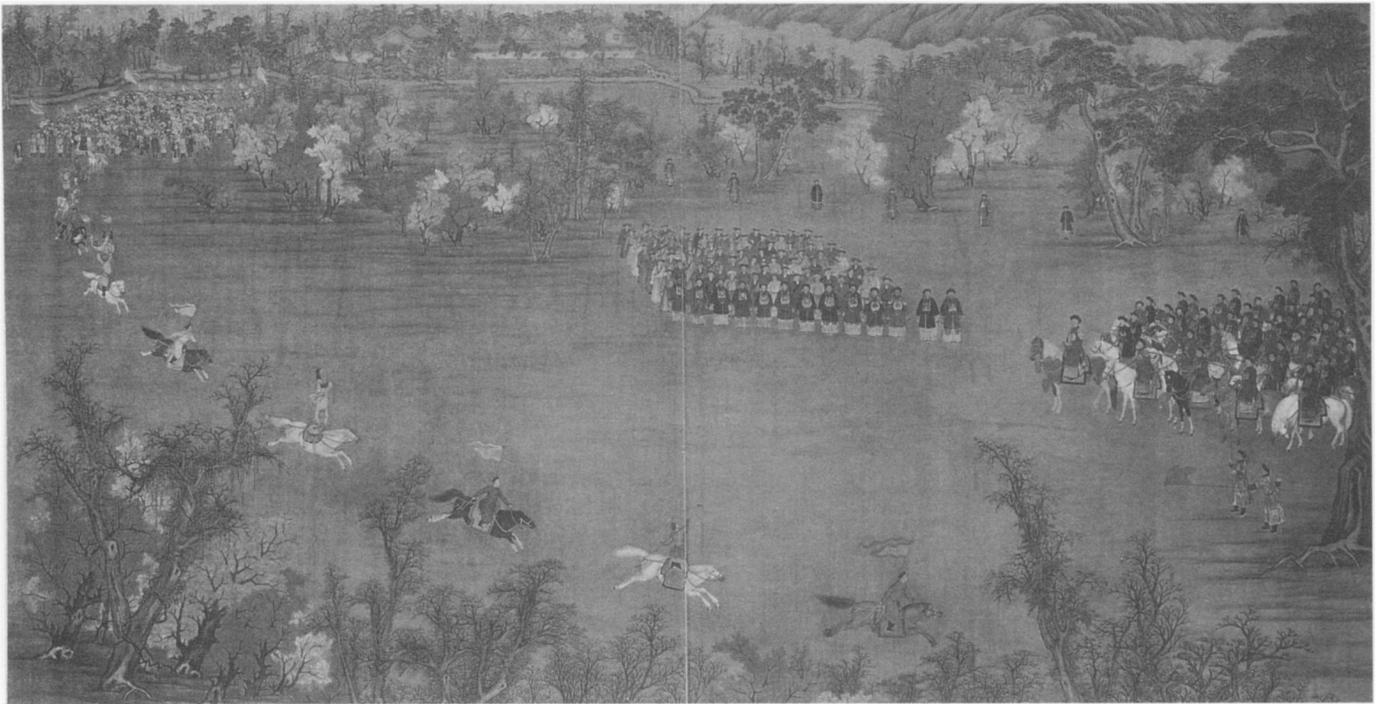


Figure 6. Giuseppe Castiglione and others, *Horsemanship*, 1755. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, H: 223.4 cm, W: 426.2 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Dorbots, where the point was not to destroy them as rivals but to make them a component of Qing power, the process can be defined in Hevia's terms as one of incorporation and differentiation. In terms of the ritual process, the parallel terms are proximity and distance. The rank of each participant was defined by the degree of intimate interaction he was allowed with the emperor—and by the restricting of such interaction, for example, by the necessity of speaking with the emperor through a mediator, or by not being able to speak to him at all. Everyone's interaction with the emperor was restricted in some way, but any *kind* of interaction with him was considered an honor. Following Hevia and others, I take it that the relations of power here were essentially fluid and even open to negotiation. Power was not only made manifest but was *created* in the signifying economy of the ritual, its organization, the timing of events, and the gestures and physical deportment of its participants.

The *Guest Ritual* (*bin li*) section of the *Comprehensive Rites* describes the procedure for imperial audiences at the Hall of Supreme Harmony

(Taihe dian) in Beijing.¹¹ This was the preferred site for guest ritual, but Angela Zito suggests that the Wanshu yuan served the same purpose for the reception of Mongol leaders.¹² In this prescriptive account, the process begins with the foreign lord's request to bring an embassy to the imperial court. Once it arrived, the embassy was received by Qing officials, while the Board of Rites inspected the embassy's gifts and memorialized the emperor in request of an audience. Once the request was approved, on the appointed day, the members of the embassy would be led in order of rank to a point just outside the gates of the ceremonial hall. From here they would be led to the west side (the right side from the south-facing emperor's viewpoint) of the hall courtyard, where they kowtowed. Finally, they were led up the west stairs to the hall's west door and

11. *The Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing [Da Qing tongli]* (Beijing, 1756), *juan* 43:3b–5a. See the *Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature (Siku quanshu)*, comp. Ji Yun (1779; reprint, Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1978), series 8, vol. 130.

12. Zito (see note 8).

kneeled down. The emperor initiated a conversation at this threshold, with the imperial words first being passed to the board director and then to the translator. The ambassador responded to the emperor through the same route, reversed. When this conversation ended, the embassy party retreated. This procedure might be followed by a further audience, this time in a “convenient” hall, where the embassy would take its position on the west side, at the end of a line of banner officials. As Hevia notes, even in this more intimate setting, the visiting officials never occupied the center axis of the hall and they kowtowed not directly in front of the emperor, but outside the hall. The very indirectness of one’s access to the emperor—in terms of the amount of time necessary to get to him and the complex rules governing one’s physical placement—testified to his importance and his power to determine others’ behavior. At the same time, the ritual is replete with symbols of shared participation in Qing glory. As the primary example of this, we should consider the function of the banquet meal, an example of which is unfortunately not found in the above excerpt. (In the above account, banqueting takes place just before the foreign retinue’s official leave-taking.)

We are fortunate, however, to have a prescriptive account of a banquet at the Wanshu yuan from the records of the Bureau for Vassal Administration. Unfortunately, the records do not give an account of the company’s procession to the Wanshu yuan or their manner of conveyance into the banquet tent. Its description of the events preceding the meal is brief:

Upon the entrance of the Emperor, conducted by the officiating masters of ceremonies, the Hutuktu lamas, clad in embroidered dragon mantles with plain long jackets, and the khans, wearing the embroidered dragon mantles beneath jackets with breast-plates, fall to their knees outside the tent and greet him. When the Emperor has taken his place on the throne, the Hutuktus, khans, and others are conducted into the tent, where they perform the kowtow ceremony once, whereupon they go to their places.¹³

The seating arrangement is described as follows. Some Hutuktus were permitted to sit on low divans on either side of but behind the emperor’s throne, while others sat “beyond” (behind?) the Imperial Guard. The Mongol

khans and other noblemen sat to the right and left of the emperor “in order of precedence.” What follows is a complex description of the meal’s consumption, which is opened by the reciprocal offering of tea and wine, punctuated by the guests’ kowtows. In the course of the meal proper, the emperor eats first, but himself offers some of the dishes to his guests. We should keep in mind here the choreographed nature of food consumption. Eating involved a complex exchange of signifying gestures, of which the sheer number of utensils is an adequate measure—each sitter might be equipped with 50 or even 100 drinking cups! The meal is followed up with more tea and then the musical and acrobatic entertainment, which in this account occurs inside the tent.

This being a prescriptive account, it does not tell us what actually occurred in Qing ritual, still less what these ritual events meant in practice for their rather limited audience. Similarly, we should not assume that the authors of the painting were primarily concerned with ritual, either its prescriptive or real-life versions. This is not to say that the painting is unreadable as an account of ritual. On the contrary, it compels the viewer to infer an order of events, albeit on its own, often ambiguous terms.

The painting as apparent record of a ritual event

In general, the documentary claims of the painting focus on the complex coordination and preparation of bodies and ritual objects. The ritual’s dramatic intensity, we could say, rests on the question of their deployment. If the moment represented is the emperor’s arrival and if this marks the commencement of the banquet ritual, then we can expect a massive reordering of the scene for the banquet proper, which the viewer would have known to expect. This has been taken into account by the artists. The compact tables set (apparently) with edibles in front of the dining hall (fig. 7) stand ready for the banquet guests and foreshadow the replacement of the first course with numerous others, currently being prepared in the ad hoc kitchen. Most important, however, the physical route of officials and attendants to the reception hall stands out in relief. Zito notes that the ritual’s “architectural” requirements were essentially the same at Beijing and Jehol: a large, open space, *as well* as a more intimate space to retreat to (that is, in the present case, the *jurte*, which functions as the audience or reception hall). Transit from one area to another

13. *Records of the Bureau for Vassal Administration*, chap. 31. See Hedin (see note 8), pp. 168–173.

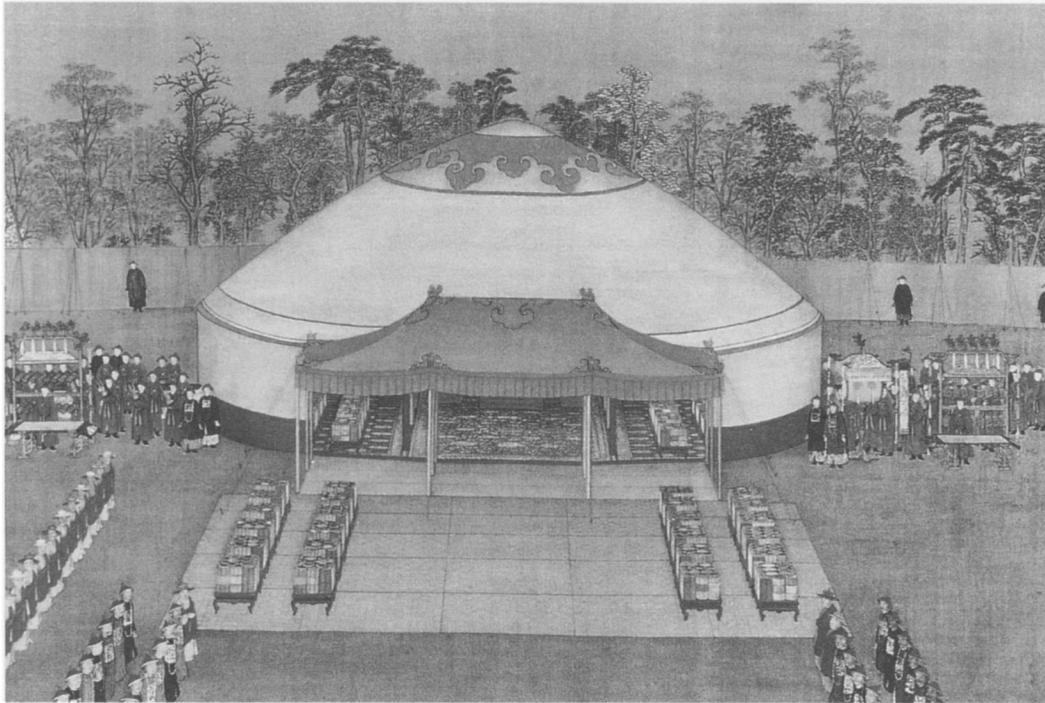


Figure 7. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, top right, *jurte* and immediate vicinity), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

marked stages in an increasing or decreasing intimacy with the imperial body. We can assume, then, that the choice to depict such a moment of physical transition was highly calculated. If one imagines that the acrobatic structures in the extreme foreground mark a general endpoint for the ritual (the closing entertainments), what are the intermediate events? Since the tables are already set with food, it is plausible that eating precedes the giving of gifts, for which the canopied stalls on the far right have been laid out. By contrast, the musical group installed around the tent is suggestively part of the banquet meal; and the Vassal Administration records confirm that music was initiated towards the end of the meal. But what is the immediate train of events, the getting to and filling up of the banquet "hall" by emperor, entourage, and guests? Following the *Comprehensive Rites*, the emperor would enter the *jurte* first, with high officials following in order of rank. Yet it is distinctly difficult to imagine the route of this group, since they themselves form the architecture of the pathway to the tent.

Furthermore, it is difficult to reconcile the scale of the small, meticulous banquet hall with the great number of figures shown¹⁴ (see fig. 1). The strong perspective converging on the tent only exacerbates the incompatibility of subjects and dining space. Rather than implying recession, the extreme foreshortening here suggests almost a suctioning of space into discrete, "miniaturesque" proportions. This disjunction between figures and recessed tent is heightened in another way as well. The left end of the painting is unevenly loaded with points of interest that compete for attention with the receding ceremonial axis leading from the climbers to the *jurte*. Our attention is pulled by the sheer weight of figures in the left periphery and by the enticing view outside the yellow partition, where the ceremonial foods are being prepared. The emperor himself appears in the far left foreground, far afield of his throne, which is just

14. This observation was first made by members of the *Art and Imperial Ideology* seminar at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, Fall 1995.

visible inside the *jurte*. This displacement of the painting's protagonist, along with the general pull away from the banquet hall, introduces on the level of pictorial organization a comparable expression of the painting's narrative open-endedness. If, as it appears, the imperial entourage is about to turn down the center path, not only the Mongol subjects, but the very parameters of the painting will have to shift.

To claim that these ambiguities constitute problems with the painting will not do, of course. They are not meant to block a reading of the picture, but rather to involve the viewer more closely in the visual and narrative decoding of the painting. Because we know that the emperor *must* constitute the center of events, we project a narrative that will correct his apparent marginalization. We imagine the process of paying court, with all the figures in the painting engaging in those choreographed shows of respect and attention that effectively define the ruler as supreme being. But this foreknowledge, part of what the contemporary viewer took to the painting, has to be fitted with the physical conditions described in it. Thus the problem of the projected arrangement of figures inside the tent demands further attention. Certainly, not everyone will be dining with the emperor, but beyond that, who will be dining with him and why (why one person and not the other?) become paramount questions on which the pictorial narrative is staked. One possible solution emerges from an analysis of the layout of figures in the middleground and foreground, focusing on distinctions of status and prestige in the simplified collectives. In short, we can rank the various participants and relate each "in order of precedence" to the emperor. This is one key to understanding the logic of the painting, which otherwise seems peculiarly unresolved. The viewer solves the problem posed by the tent's small proportions by assuming that only *some* participants and not others will be allowed this privileged access.

Within the main rectangular grouping, there is a distinct gap between the first two rows of Qing military and civil officials, and the third row of Dorbots (fig. 8). Secondly, the latter group is itself contrasted with the low and middling Mongol officials in the back five rows. These men are distinguished not only by costume (they are not in Qing uniform) but by their rambunctious behavior and visual unruliness. As the emperor makes his entrance, they are chatting with one another, and their knocked-together hats define them visually as a sort of rabble. The juxtaposition of one row against, and

in front of, five others itself indicates a ruler-ruled relationship, and we should not assume that such an arrangement came about naturally. In the rows of court officials, meanwhile, civil and military officials wear different costumes, but the figures themselves are evenly distributed. By contrast, all figures, Qing and Mongol alike, come in for comparison with the imperial entourage and with the Qianlong emperor, whose lateral position establishes a decisive relationship with the left group of figures. Like the Qing and high Dorbot officials in the first three rows, the imperial group is orderly and horizontal, and even Qianlong's sitting position is similar to that of the audience. His superiority has to be inferred, from indicators such as his size and physical elevation, the framing tree, and the imperial canopy.

With some sense of the hierarchical order, we are in a better position to solve the problem of the small banquet tent and the enormous crowd. At least we know who some of the expendable actors are. Also, the tree and canopy foreshadow the emperor's central position inside the tent, the sedan chair functioning as an earlier manifestation of the imperial throne. There are hints, then, of what a fully realized banquet scene will look like. The artist shows the emperor initiating the banquet and rhetorically alludes to its fulfillment. It should be noted that the scene ostensibly represents the precise liminal moment between the emperor's setting into motion of the ceremony and his subjects' active response. The drama of that moment is given best perhaps in the position of the leading canopy carrier, a military personage, directly in front of a row of Qing officials. As noted earlier, the imperial procession is about to turn towards the banquet tent, a move that will require a whole new arrangement of the audience and its careful depositing into the *jurte*. Because the painting signals to the viewer how the narrative will play out, it is able to engage him as what might be called a second-order participant. The viewer, too, is a "completor" in so far as he must construct the narrative and conceptually unify the broad, open scene.

I have tried to enumerate the ways in which *Imperial Banquet* compels its viewer to envision that unity. The psychological centrality of the tent, as well as the positioning of the foreground structures towards the right, are hints that both the narrative and pictorial viewpoint will have to shift to get closer to the tent, and farther over to the right, where the gift stall sits. Once that happens, some participants will emerge as central actors in the scene. Whether offset from the throne or

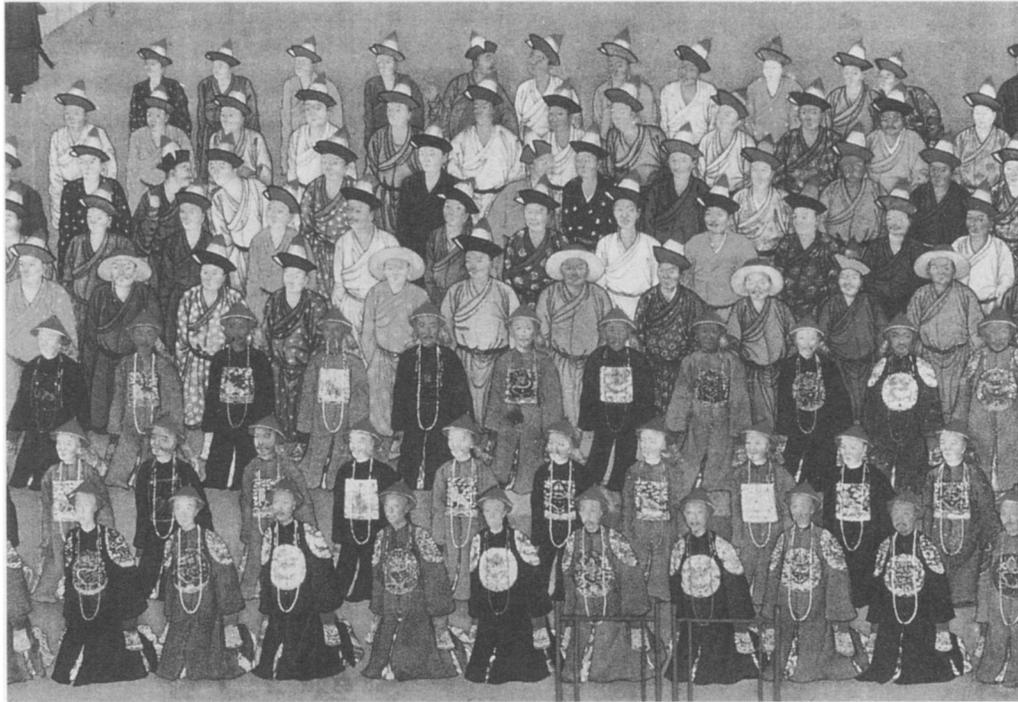


Figure 8. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, Dorbots and others), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

outside the tent altogether, the imperial subjects and vassals will be composed *around* the emperor, brought into a symbolic structure of all-embracing Qing authority.

Pictorial rhetoric

So far, my account of *Imperial Banquet* has dealt with an inferred narrative based on what is known to have been true of Qing ritual. I have emphasized a “normalized” ritual reading of the picture on the part of its intended audience, because this seems to be one type of reading historically viable for that audience. But there is also the picture as such to be made sense of. Since a good part of what I have been claiming for the painting would have been perceptible in the ritual, how can this particular painted representation be accounted for? In the following discussion, I will be talking less about the viewer’s “reading” of the image, and more about the work’s modes of visual disclosure. In contrast to the narrative crux—the dramatic moment for which the viewer must supply the proper succeeding

moments—there is the rigid image of things seen. In the main part of the picture, figures’ feet conventionally indicate movement (right foot back, left forward) and their heads are periodically turned to one another, but none of the implied physical action quite registers as real and temporal. Likewise, the foreground structures do not so much interrupt our view of moving figures as carefully separate and dispose them. All this may seem like naked control of the representation in the service of legibility. But it is less the case that things are legible than that they are stubbornly exact, often for no apparent reason associated with the ritual narrative. For example, the clearing in which the ceremony takes place is framed by a yellow partition, which puts the ritual scene in dramatic focus and urges attention toward everything within its parameters. This we would expect. Less so the scene behind the partition on the left, where the servants’ preparation of the food is depicted with all kinds of anecdotal detail. Why does the artist frame a view and then paint something very exacting and absorbing right outside it?



Figure 9. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, left side, landscape and outside partition), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

On the one hand, the landscape beyond the barrier functions as a morphological counterpoint to the flat clearing (fig. 9). We can see this most clearly in the sprawling mountain in the upper left of the panel, which carefully inverts the outstanding traits of the banquet hall, its self-contained outline and psychological remoteness. The tent seems remote largely because we are fooled into thinking it represents a perspectival “vanishing point.” It is surprising to find that the strong orthogonals marked by the flanking ladders on the largest acrobatic scaffold do not meet up at the tent; at most, they share with it a similar vertical axis, which, however, is not at all a “vanishing-axis,” since plenty of objects do not adhere to it. The natural scenery makes a rather strong contrast with this pseudo-perspective. Not only are many of the nature elements calligraphically rendered, making them stand forward rather than recede, but the rural landscape clearly relies on a non-Western system for depicting solid objects and space. Note, for example, the very Chinese way in which the receding surfaces of

the mountain are pressed forward and at the same time given distinct contours. The area fenced out by the ritual almost steals attention from that European spatial configuration spelled out between acrobatic structures and the tent/dining hall. While there are important symbolic reasons for the landscape’s peculiar prominence—to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual space and to intensify the painting’s topographical specificity—the strange double-sidedness of the painting’s view also smacks of painterly bravura.

One sees this in the contrast between the men standing with their backs to the partition and a figure walking in the midst of the food preparations, hunched over and hurrying along. And in the three figures huddled almost into a corner of the kitchen, where the partition turns sharply parallel to the viewer. This last example recalls the long-standing Western convention of the three-figure group, which serves to offer multiple and varied views of the body. If that comparison is relevant, it suggests something beyond the task of defining one kind of space against another. What

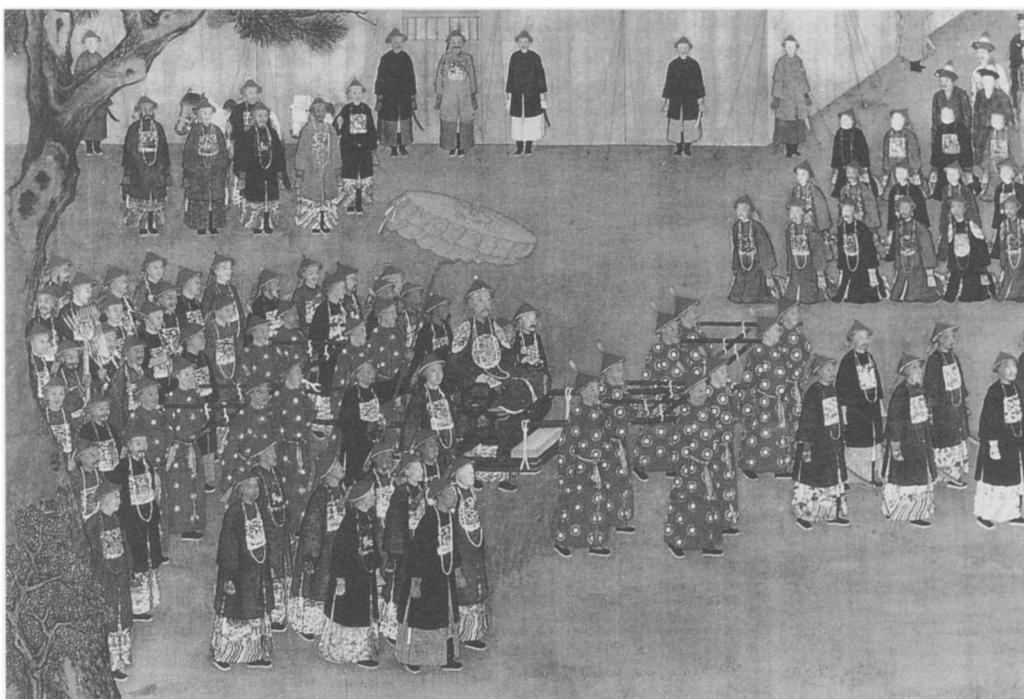


Figure 10. Jean-Denis Attiret, Giuseppe Castiglione, Ignace Sickelpart, and Chinese artists, *Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* (detail, imperial entree and tree at left border), 1755. Palace Museum, Beijing.

matters, the painting tells us, is showing bodies and spaces per se. Following this line of argument, the kitchen/country terrain functions as a visual prospect. And its enchanting, serendipitous quality arises from its being adjacent to the ritual proceedings while not exposed to them. Only pictorial representation can achieve this kind of enchantment, showing us two fields of action simultaneously. Another instance of what I have called *bravura*—we might equally think of it as a kind of self-conscious, serious play—is the large tree in the left foreground, split down the middle in a rather felicitous way by the painting's left border (fig. 10). Huge in size and elegantly proportioned, this bit of nature actually benefits from the abrupt vertical edge. Against the latter, the tree's prickly, rough-textured surfaces registers quite tactilely. But it is above all the multiplicity of the tree's pictorial functions that surprises and pleases. Both "natural" and calligraphic, trunk and foliage delicately reattach foreground and far background, creating a punning relationship between mountain-side foliage and near leaves. Boughs, tendrils,

and needles surreptitiously enfold the dispersed individuals on the dusty ground, while the tree's limbs and gnarled joints restate the extended lines of imperial attendants. Moreover, the tree's framing of the imperial entourage strongly affects how we interpret the emperor's arrival, which paradoxically becomes an "entrance" to an outdoor ceremony. An *entrée* like this could not have constituted any distinct part of the ceremony; nevertheless, the tree trunk, acting as stage curtain, makes it a ritual event. I make this point in order to draw attention to the painting's invention of a type of dramatic action that, while still registering as real, is specifically pictorial.

This emphasis on pictorial means of narrative is also one on pictoriality per se. Tree, *jurte*, acrobatic structures, and partition surround and mark a scene of action, but they undoubtedly also serve as formal anchors for the painting's composition and for the painted surface generally. Branches and leaves read calligraphically even as they compel the viewer to peek *through* them at the scene. Similarly, the foreground

structures mark the symbolic threshold into depth, but they are abstract in a distinctly visual way too. On the one hand, the red poles and beams invoke the European conception of the picture as “window onto the world”, since they frame the main plunge into depth. On the other hand, the delicate configuration of red lines aptly summarizes the work’s mode or style, particularly its combination of strong graphic design and delicately painted color. The red scaffolding, in fact, echoes the whole organizational strategy of the painting: its balancing of lateral sweep and spatial penetration. Contrasted with all this is the “real-world” function of the yellow wall, which *physically* separates (three-dimensional) space but, by comparison with a painted geometry, in a somewhat crude and mechanical fashion.

Related to these aesthetic issues is the Qing court’s fascination with European technology, of which the Jesuit missionaries were primary bearers of knowledge. Joanna Waley-Cohen has discussed Manchu interest in and exploitation of Western military technology (as well as Jesuit exploitation of such interest), and points to the way in which this interest eventually extended to European skills in mathematics, astronomy, cartography, and geography. The last two disciplines regularly overlapped with artistic production. Then, too, there were experimental applications of Western-type painting. In the 1740s Jesuit artists constructed the *Hudong xianfa tu* (Xianfa Picture East of the Lake) for the *Yuanming Yuan* summer residence in Peking. This was composed of a series of brick facades arranged like the wings of a stage, on which perspectively rendered buildings were painted; some were modeled as well.¹⁵ The ensemble was meant to create the illusion of a European town seen at a distance from across a lake (in fact, a man-made pool). The project is relevant to the *Imperial Banquet* given the similar thematization of Western spatial illusion. In another sense, the *Yuanming Yuan* comparison brings out less obvious aspects of the painting. *Imperial Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* is rigorously a document, but it is also something more: an illusion created for the benefit of the viewer, who would savor a form of Qing intellectual culture as much as the

pageantry of its rituals. These preoccupations may seem frivolous, until we acknowledge that empire is a conceptual entity—even an imaginary one. The organized consumption of such forms of elite visual culture signaled the emperor’s capacity to rivet his subjects’ minds and imaginations, provinces that never yield to sheer force.

I argued earlier against the interpretation of ritual as merely the display of an established power regime. Primary sources make clear that Qing ritual was a charged arena in which power relations were enacted and effectively made. Given this situation, one may guess that the official representors of ritual did not have the option of simply recording or even minutely interpreting events. Painting had to find some formal structure and address that would be comparably grand and yet wholly its own, since the ritual event was no single comprehensible thing. Like the “banquet” it depicts, *Imperial Banquet in the Park of Ten Thousand Trees* transforms an otherwise amorphous constellation of bodies and objects into a highly controlled, rhetorical display. And yet it is apparent that visual depictions of ritual were understood to be distinct from ritual action. Painting’s impressive effects were to be registered continually, and possibly eked out for centuries. In this way, the present artwork may more nearly approach that elusive, universal audience that Qing ritual seems intent on addressing.

15. See Carroll Brown Malone, *History of the Peking Summer Palaces under the Qing Dynasty* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1934), pp. 159–160.

GLOSSARY

Ai Qimeng	艾啓蒙
Amursana	阿睦爾撒納
<i>bin li</i>	賓禮
Bishu shanzhuang	避暑山莊
Cheling	車凌
Cheling mengke	車凌孟克
Cheling wubashi	車凌烏巴什
Chengde	承德
<i>Da Qing tongli</i>	大清通禮
Hu Shijie	胡世杰
<i>Huang Qing zhigong tu</i>	皇清職貢圖
<i>Hudong xianfa tu</i>	湖東線法圖
Juana shengjing	卷阿勝境
Lang Shining	郎世寧
Leng Mei	冷枚
Mulan	木蘭
Qian Deming	錢德明
Qianlong	乾隆
Qing	清
Shen Yu	沈喻
Taihe dian	太和殿
Wanshu yuan	萬樹園
Wang Zhicheng	王致誠
Xinjiang	新疆
Yongyou si	永祐寺
Yuanming yuan	圓明園