

A Vision of Grandeur and Specificity: Western Perspective in 18th Century Chinese Urban Images

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As is widely known, in 18th century China, architectural painting (*jiehua* 界畫) reemerged as the major genre in addition to landscape and flower-and-bird painting. After the lapse of more than three hundred years, this genre in the 18th century did not entirely follow its original trajectory but thrived with a new understanding of spatial configuration in the new sub-genres such as cityscapes. Cityscapes representing urban life and city infrastructure employed Western pictorial techniques of chiaroscuro and perspective to project a new vision of cities. The integration of Western perspective into Chinese images of cities provided the viewer an unprecedented experience of three-dimensional space that could contain and highlight the complicated interplay of built environments and human activities. This vision of grandeur was combined with a sense of specificity produced by the detailed and precise depiction of streets, gates, walls, bridges, and palaces, a sense of the concrete existence of a specific city that was under the grand rule of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

On the other hand, the use of clouds to cover up the distant background inconsistencies and the use of multiple and occasionally unspecified vanishing points in these cityscapes demonstrated a process of negotiation between Chinese and Western pictorial traditions. The mixture of Chinese and Western pictorial techniques and concepts created a special flavor in these cityscapes that was hybrid and heterogeneous. However, this mixture did not diminish the exotic feeling of these cityscapes; in fact, their Chinese pictorial elements further enhanced the sense of grandeur because of its suggestion of an ever-expanding space.

This predilection for a Westernized visual effect can be seen in different kinds of cityscapes that crossed the boundaries of court painting and Suzhou woodblock prints, the latter of which are all in Japanese collections. It seems that in the 18th century, the new vision of cities influenced by Western viewing practice appealed both to the Qing emperors and the consumers of popular prints. These consumers included Chinese common people without strong purchasing power or high education and wealthy

Japanese people who could afford imported commodities from China through the Sino-Japanese trade conducted in the seaports of Zhapu 乍浦 and Nagasaki 長崎.

This paper will focus on the paintings and prints that used Western perspective to represent urban images and life, with a special emphasis on how this new technique worked to create a new vision of Beijing and Suzhou. Also, it will tackle the issue of how Western perspective was understood and viewed in China by such authors as Nian Xiyao 年希堯 and Zhang Geng 張庚 (1752-92). Furthermore, this paper will make a detour to Japan for the following reasons. According to the related records, there were many Western visual products, most likely engravings, imported to China in the 18th century. These engravings were widely circulated among the literati class and purchased by Korean envoys when they visited Beijing. However, the lack of concrete visual evidence in Chinese collections poses a difficult task for any further research. This paper will use the Western engravings in Japan to reflect on the parallel situation in 18th century China. Also, the fact that Suzhou prints were exported to Japan in a great number in the 18th century proves to us that Japanese sources are very relevant if we understand how Suzhou prints were viewed and consumed. As such, this paper will attempt to involve a discussion of three cultures and pictorial traditions.