During the Emperor Qianlong’s reign (1735-1796), Jesuit missionaries in Beijing built a small Western garden, commonly known as Xiyang Lou (European style houses) in Yuanming Yuan, one of the largest gardens of the Qing emperors. Previous scholars such as Alexander Schultz (1966) and Michèle Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens (1987) have shown linkages between this Western garden and Baroque examples in Europe—fountains, labyrinths and multi-storied buildings. Zou’s account, however, is the first to discuss this garden in a transcultural context using the diverse methods of philosophy, phenomenology, philology and cultural studies. Tying the Western garden firmly to the theme of Yuanming (Round Brightness), Zou reveals this Western garden, designed jointly by the Jesuits and the Qianlong emperor, to be an illustration of their various ways of seeking the enlightening of both vision and the mind. The Western garden, Zou argues, demonstrates a dialogue between the Chinese classic concept of jing 景 (scene) and European ‘views’ constructed by using a linear perspective.

The structure of the book adopts the procedure of this cultural encounter: the context of Yuanming (chapters 1, 2), the entity of jing (chapter 3), the Chinese translation of the linear perspective (chapter 4), and finally, the creation of the jing using the line method (chapter 5). Contextualizing Yuanming (Round Brightness) in both Chinese cultural history and in the Qing emperors’ writings ( chapters 1, 2 and Appendix), Zou presents the major theme of the Qing emperors’ garden as a moral and cosmological
concept—the Dao of Heaven. While the ‘round’ meant the perfection and concentration of the mind, indicating the timeliness and moderation of the behaviour of a virtuous man, the ‘brightness’ meant to illuminate all things in order to reach human wisdom. Yet Round Brightness is also an essential quality of vision, or jing, as Zou further reveals in chapter 3 that jing is a ‘deep, bright view of landscapes.’ Driven by the artist’s emotion, the composition of jing as ‘perfect brightness,’ or in Zou’s words, ‘the opening up of jing’ thus ‘mirrored the enlightenment of the heart.’ Considering jing not as a mere aesthetic concept, but as a view that appears ‘bright, bounded, emotion-connected and poetical to the mind,’ Zou highlights the implicit Chinese cultural tradition of how the pursuit of the distant view in landscape and garden appreciation brought brightness to a scholar’s mind and world. This cultural tradition is crucial, Zou indicates, in understanding the Qing emperors’ interest in the European linear perspective.

As Zou carefully unfolds in chapter 4, the Chinese reception of the European linear perspective entails a history of Chinese-European cultural contact on cosmology, geometry and theology since Matteo Ricci (Li Madou 利瑪竇). On the one hand, the neo-Confucian concept of reason (li 理), as Zou reveals, was associated by Ricci and Leibniz with the Western way of speaking of God—both have an image of a circle and brightness. This would indicate a metaphysical and theological understanding which prepared the Jesuits’ focus on the brightness of the Qing emperors’ garden scenes and their association with metaphysical light. On the other hand, in China, from Ricci and Xu Guangqi’s translation of Euclid’s Elements into Chinese (published in 1607, entitled Jihe yuanben 幾何原本) to the Qing official Nian Xiyao’s Shixue 視學 (Perception Studies, 1729), an elaboration of Andrea Pozzo’s Perspectiva Pictorum et Architectorum (1698), Chinese scholars have connected the principle of geometry or perspective with the Neo-Confucianist concept of li, as they noted that the significance of the perspective painting lay in its truthful appearance.

Based on this in-depth cultural analysis of jing and perspective, Zou proceeds to examine the copperplate engravings of the Twenty Views of Xiyang Lou (drawn by Yi Lantai 伊蘭泰) using the line method (chapter 5). As revealed by Zou, a Chinese appropriation of European linear perspective, the line method was not a mere instrument of representation, but a geometrical medium built on the interconnections between Christian and Chinese metaphysics. The line method not only constructed garden views with depth and a central focal point, but also provoked the emperors’ poetic experience of remoteness and his consciousness of the self. The Twenty Views of Xiyang Lou using the line method, thus, as Zou suggests, are integral with the Forty jing of Yuanming Yuan. Because the geometrical lines in the Twenty Views may be understood as not only the path to the distance, but also the path along which the brightness diffuses. The seeking
or viewing of jing thus expresses the emperors’ pursuit of Round Brightness, the ultimate sincerity and the light of a virtuous man. Built at the boundary of Yuanming Yuan, the Jesuit garden of the line method may, furthermore, be a metaphor of the diffusion of the Round Brightness from a remote boundary of Europe, both physically and culturally, into the existence of jing.

Giving an overall innovative and convincing account of the Western garden in Yuanming Yuan, Zou impresses readers most with the ambivalent philosophical images of Round Brightness of the garden that he presents, a combination of brightness and depth that held one meaning for the emperor and another for the Jesuits. While the emperor’s eyes were drawn into the concentrated depth of the jing using the line method, the Jesuits focused on the brightness of jing that resonated with the metaphysical light in their minds. Some readers may disagree with Zou here. If the Western garden of the line method demonstrates, as Zou suggests, how people from different cultures and religions could collectively construct a common ground, it is doubtful whether ‘cultural differences merged without losing their original strength’. Rather they may have become hybridized, with meanings that tended to be elusive.

Zou’s innovative analysis may also be strengthened by a closer study of the role of li, the neo-Confucian concept of reason in both the Qing emperors’ thoughts and their conception of Yuanming. Provided with a cornucopia of Chinese philosophies including Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, some readers are left wondering whether neo-Confucian ideas such as Zhou Dunyi’s moral and cosmological image of li as the round brightness of the moon (Yuan, 2008) may be presented in a more central position, given neo-Confucianism featured in both the Qing emperors’ ideologies (Millward et al., 2011) and Jesuit receptions of Chinese thought.

Zou must also be credited for his excellent work on the annotated English translations of the Qing emperors’ key garden records (ji 記), poems, and the philosophical essays on the imperial gardens located in the north-western suburb of Beijing and Chengde. These translations and their interpretations in the book open up a new perspective for understanding individual life as well as the political and environmental philosophy of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors.
References


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