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# RENDERING SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP IN TROUBLED TIMES: GIUSEPPE CASTIGLIONE AND THE QIANLONG EMPEROR CO-CREATORS IN THE GARDEN OF GARDENS

## 苦难时期展现的精神友谊： 郎世宁与乾隆皇帝圆明园的共同缔造者

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### ABSTRACT

Giuseppe Castiglione, arrived in China during one of the most troubled times in history, in the midst of the Rites Controversy. Yet, he came to know the interiority of the Qianlong emperor with deep intimacy. His design work at the *Yuanmingyuan* reflects an empathic understanding of the Emperor's desires and longings, emulating the spiritual unity of the Lord Creator with artists and architects working as one. Having known Qianlong since the Emperor's childhood, he was well aware of his pleasures and concerns, his self perception as Son of Heaven, and Lord of the vast domain he held together in an era of peace. Castiglione and his Jesuit brethren gathered inspiration from the creative design of gardens and palaces from their imaginative memory and the similar lived experience of the most powerful figures in Europe. Parallels are drawn between Maria de Medici's longing for her home in Florence articulated in the design of Luxembourg garden and the emperor's desire to quell the longing of his Fragrant Concubine, Xiang Fei, for her home in Kashgar shown in the Islamic influences found the Belvedere palace at *Yuanmingyuan*. Marian imagery in the depiction of the Emperor's concubine waiting for her Lord is also examined. The spiritual lesson: in times of crisis, speak less, listen more and engage your senses.

Rendering Spiritual Friendship in  
Troubled Times

*When life is peaceful and without trouble, it is difficult to distinguish the true from the false friend. Only when difficulties arise do the true feelings of a friend reveal themselves. For it is in time of crisis, true friends will draw closer and false friends will become increasingly scarce.*

Matteo Ricci, #5 Essay On Friendship, 1595

The early 18th Century was a troubled time in relations between Rome and China. When Giuseppe Castiglione became a temporal coadjutor brother of Jesuits in 1707, at age nineteen, it was already decided that he would be sent to the center of the storm. After two years of training in Genoa, he went to Portugal to await his passage eastward. The Kangxi emperor was eager to have him, requesting personally a skilled painter, especially in portraiture, along with a musician, a good surgeon and a few others artisans to work in the imperial court.

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The angel Raphael  
with Tobias, fish and  
faithful dog  
Giuseppe Castiglione,  
1709  
Pio Istituto Martinez,  
Genova, Italy

Studying in Genoa, he painted the journey of Tobias eastward, with the angel Rafael and a faithful dog. Once settled in China, Castiglione becomes a spiritual friend to the Qianlong emperor, learning of his penchant for hunting, for the company of beautiful women and for acquiring lands, as far as the eye could see and the brush could paint. He knew how to listen deeply to the desires and interior movements of the emperor's heart. And, he knew the perfect distance to keep for the right perspective on the emperor's women.

Castiglione arrived in China in the maelstrom of the Rites controversy, on the heels of the Papal Legate, Maillard de Tournon, who came to China to put an end to ritual worship of ancestors, once and for all. De Tournon had been exiled and imprisoned and foreign missionaries were banned from China. It was no easy environment to navigate. And yet, in 1747, the

emperor Qianlong commissioned Castiglione to create the crowning jewels of his personal retreat, the *Yuanmingyuan*, on the outskirts of Beijing, a place to welcome international dignitaries in the midst of troubled times. Just over a hundred years later, this magnificent creation, would be leveled by French and British forces in 1861 during the Second Opium War. The *Yuanmingyuan* grew into a heavenly court where the Son of Heaven and his concubine would have a fleeting vision of Paradise.

Though it was referred to as a palace, it was by no means one singular palace or garden, but rather a garden of gardens, *The Garden of Gardens*. It was here that the emperor and his concubine would bring forth his own creation. He was, after all, the Son of Heaven, as was his father and grandfather, and creation was his dominion.



Jin Tingbiao, Chinese active (c. 1750–68), and Giuseppe Castiglione (attributed to), Italian 1688–1766, worked in China 1714–66, *The Qianlong Emperor Enjoying the Pleasures of Life*, poem inscribed by Qianlong Emperor in the spring of 1763, coloured inks on silk, 168 x 320 cm (The Palace Museum, Beijing, Gu5278)

Nine “Western Palaces” named for their European style, grew out of the collective memory of Castiglione and his Jesuit brothers from their years in Europe. These men, trained not only in theology, but in painting, mathematics and hydraulics, recalled details from the most spectacular palaces of Italy and France, from their cultural heritage in the spirit of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Baroque flora and fauna mingling with bamboo and limestone under Castiglione’s auspices brought to life European luxury for the Chinese imperial court. The design of the nine Western Palaces allowed Castiglione to reveal the glory of God in the heart of China. Castiglione

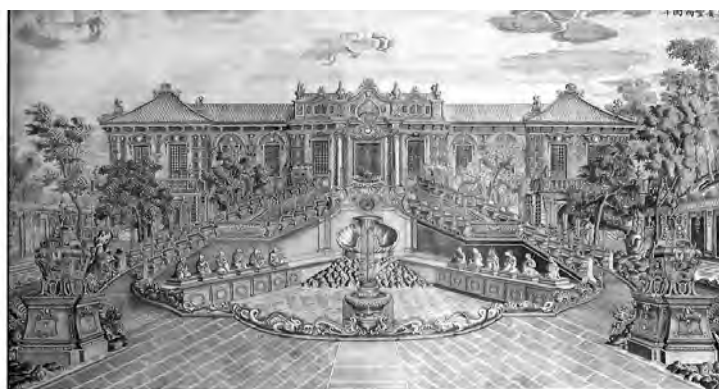
could see the world so well through the Emperor’s eyes, that the emperor’s creation and God’s creation flowed like the very fountains and rivers he designed.

As the Jesuits would have it, this was all for the Greater Glory of God, but which God, which Lord? The Emperor of course beckoned. But was Castiglione, let alone any of the other Jesuits, to raise the delicate question to the Emperor that it might not be he thus risking their privileged position as the handful of foreign missionaries who were still operative in China in the mid 18th Century?

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Only a few years before their work at *Yuanminguan*, in 1752, Castiglione and his brethren had designed a magnificent miniature fountain clock, a kind of miniature theater, for the mother of Emperor Qianlong. In that clock, her imagination could revel, with threads of glass pouring into a mirror pool, and the beak of a duck pointing to the time, with three small scenes painted by Castiglione himself. (Musillo, 2012, p. 15) The miniature would provide the imaginative impetus for one of the most impressive fountains.



Xieqiu nanmian, south façade of Palace of the Delights of Harmony.

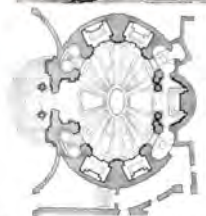
According to renderings, water from the mouths of sculpted dolphins and lions cascaded along marble balustrades, with fifty-four sprinklers surrounding a water-clock, *louhu*. It was here that 12 bronze animal heads, looted during the sacking in 1861, once spouted every second hour, one after another. Growing out of human forms, these animal heads of a dog, bear, rooster, monkey, snake, horse, rat, bull, tiger, dragon, hare and goat, symbolized the birth calendar—the Chinese zodiac—and divisions of day and night. It was as if the Emperor himself now had dominion over these creatures as well as time itself.

Of the nine Western Palaces, The Square Outlook for Looking Abroad, later known as the Belvedere, has the most intriguing history. It was completed in time to celebrate the 50th birthday

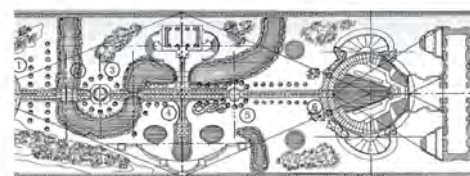
of the Emperor himself (Wong, 2001, p. 63). But the structure was most likely designed for his beloved concubine, Xiang Fei, or Riong Fei. Wild tales and historical record mingle around her. She was known as the Fragrant Concubine for her irresistible scent, which she preserved with daily baths in goat milk. A Uyghur woman from Kashgar, she was brought to the palace by the military



Fangwai Guan  
Look Abroad Hall  
"Belvedere"



Sant'Andrea al Quirinale  
Bernini 1661



Belvedere overlooking the gardens

General Zhaohui in April of 1760, after winning the campaign over Turkestan (Wong, p. 63).

The identity of this Muslim woman has continued to swirl through history to this day. Under the guided brush of Castiglione, she and other palace women are depicted with an ethereal beauty similar to the Blessed Virgin, or images of the forgiven sinner. Beyond the brushstrokes, the role of scent is also significant in the imagery of the palace women as well as the fragrant concubine, Xiang Fei herself. (Millward, 1991; p.445) According to Millward, the ethereal beauty and tranquil continence of Xiang Fei was admired by the Emperor. By one account, they met while she was washing her hair in the lake where the Emperor came to water his horse. However this tale created outrage among Uyghur Muslims, committed to preserving the pure image of the fragrant concubine. (Millward, p. 450)



The Belvedere became her home, and place of prayer upon her arrival. It was a grand three-storied structure with graceful Islamic attributes. Crescent shaped, semi-circular stairs embraced bronze doors and two four-foot tall tablets inscribed with Arabic on the second level of the main hall. Only rubbings of these tablets remain today. It was here that this most favored concubine and other Moslems would gather on Friday evenings. (Wong, p. 63)

The design was reminiscent of the Church of S. Andrea al Quirinale in Rome, where the Jesuits had their novitiate from 1566 onwards. (Elman, 2003, p. 246) That church, rebuilt by Bernini and completed in 1678, was considered one of the finest Baroque designs in Rome. It was situated on gardens from which only the famous *Quattro Fontane* remain ([www.Romanchurches.com](http://www.Romanchurches.com)). Given that those four fountains represent the mingling of the rivers of Rome with Diana, Goddess of Chastity, and Juno, Goddess of

### Remains of the Belvedere



plan of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale



Strength, the form is a fitting inspiration to parallel the persona of the Emperor and the fragrant concubine from the far west. Bronze plates of the Belvedere, with the woman believed to be the Fragrant Concubine, (Tokyo 1964: plate 122) attest to these similarities. At the same time, the marble balustrades and moat would also be reminiscent of the garden reflecting pool created for Maria di Medici in the Luxembourg Garden in Paris. (Thiriez, 1994)

A sensitive aesthete, surely Castiglione would have been aware of the inspiration behind the Luxembourg Garden, designed to appease the longing of Maria de Medici for her beloved Boboli Gardens at the Pitti Palace in Florence, just as Xiang Fei longed desperately for her home in Kashgar. No extravagance could be too great to quell the longings of these women.

“Further east of the Calm Sea Hall stood the awe-inspiring Great Fountains, *Dashuifa*”... The fountain in the main pool was skirted by one deer and ten bronze hounds, where streams of water spewing forth created the impression of an exotic hunt, with the deer being chased by the hounds. The design of these great fountains came from etchings from “*buffets d’faux* at Versailles and St. Cloud”, which Michael Benoist SJ and others carried with them from Paris and Rome. Arriving in 1744, Benoist was an expert in mathematics, astronomy and hydraulics. (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園 #1) He and the others were well accustomed to such work from a massive beautification project going on in Rome at that time. (Rudolph, 1977, pp. 4-59). So the flow of gardens and fountains at the Yuanmingyuan, reflected a great meeting of the waters, parallel with the scale of design



in Rome and Paris. The Emperor was so proud of these great fountains that he commissioned copper plate engravings of the fountains and presented them to the court, one in 1784 and the other in 1785. (YMYA 1991 2:1565 cited by Wong, 64)

Victoria Siu, in her “Castiglione and the Yuanmingyuan Collections” writes of the Sea Calming Hall, modeled by the Jesuit architects on Versailles’ Court of Honour (Beurdeley 1971, 68). Described as a massive reservoir with playful goldfish under a glass ceiling, (Siu, 1988. 72-79), it was called the Sea of Tin, *Xihai*, surrounded with Mediterranean grapevines. (Wong, 63). The Jesuits had established glass production originally for astronomical equipment and clocks, beginning around 1712 (Elman, p. 225) on site at the Lofty Pavilion, as the workshop and growing project became known. Colorful glass

and shells decorated the pavilions and gardens. (Adam 1936, 29-30; Tong 1981, 71-80) Water under the glass ceiling could pump into the surrounding fountains and mingle with Lake Tai stones. These ruins can still be seen today, giving the impression of waters and stone of east and west in facile accord, for a brief moment until this blissful world went wildly wrong.

I am reminded here of Hieronymus Bosch and his Garden of Earthly Delights, with which Castiglione in his artistic studies may have come in contact. He brings to life this garden, an embodiment of *carpe diem*. The Emperor enjoyed his garden immensely. Rich in aesthetic sensitivities he writes:

*A few petals of the falling flowers  
Awoke me from a noontime snooze.  
The sound of fishermen, I hear.  
Relaxed, I feel.*



Dashuifa



*Sitting under a pine tree, I enjoy  
The music of birds from the bamboo  
forest.*

*Alas! The gentle east wind which reads  
my mind*

*Bows green grass into gentle waves.*

*(YMYJ 1983:2:55)*

The Emperor found peace while Castiglione found himself continually holding in tension conflicting values, navigating between Vatican directives around the Rites Controversy and the position of the Emperor. Castiglione's was an interior experience of China, whereas Rome only sent directives, words through an envoy. (Standard, 1999. 352-63). What is the lesson of Castiglione in times of crisis? Speak less, listen well and engage your senses.



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