Situated in the west of the early 21st century, how do we look at China during its equally long 18th century? What “vestiges, monuments and ruins” can we access and present that would provide us with what meanings, understandings, and innovations?

The prosperous 18th century in China witnessed the rule of the last Qing dynasty (1644-1911) by Emperors Kangxi 康熙 (r. 1662-1722), Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1723-1735), and Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1736-1795). Descendents of Jurchens who hunted and farmed to the northeast of China, these three rulers excelled in Han Chinese Confucian scholarly pursuits—qin, qi shu, hua 琴棋书画 or, playing a zither (to resonate with a peer or nature); playing a board game with a friend; writing
poems in calligraphy; and painting with brush and ink. These activities were mostly reserved for the male Han Chinese elite to express literary learning and philosophical understanding, with the last foremost used to paint literati landscapes of the mind. As such literati staffed the imperial bureaucracy, the early Manchu emperors sought to surpass their Han Chinese court officials in literati arts. The objects on display from the McMaster Museum’s collection reflect mimetically values that the Manchus inherited and incorporated, both spiritual: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and material: luxury arts (ivory, ceramics and lacquer in medium) and landscapes as imperial glory.

The early Qing emperors collected landscapes in paintings and, above all, as three-dimensional gardens. In this hobby, they followed the First Emperor of Qin (259-210 BCE), famous for having unified China and initiated the imperial dynasties in 221 BCE and, for having a palace built after that of each conquered state. First Emperor of Qin’s burning of banned books and burying alive of scholars in 213-214 BCE also inspired Emperor Qianlong to similar ideological cruelties. While he instigated the compilation of the *Siku Quanshu* or *Complete Library of the Four Treasures*, he also ordered a literary inquisition (1776-82) that saw the burning of 2,300 works deemed rebellious or unfavorable in representation of previous non-Han Chinese rulers and the beheading of many victims. By comparison, building palaces or gardens were constructive acts of grace.

In 1703 Emperor Kangxi initiated the building of *Bishu Shanzhuang* 避暑山庄 Mountain Villa To Escape the Heat at Chengde 承德 in the mountains of Jehol, about 200 km north of Beijing. This imperial summer residence combined both nomadic legacies that stemmed from their ethnic roots, such as hills and pastures for riding and hunting, and features of Han Chinese southern gardens for admiring views and boating, such as pagodas and pavilions gracing a pond or lake as those in gardens of Suzhou 苏州 or those on the West Lake in Hangzhou 杭州 and environs (accordion books on display). The latter the Manchu emperors appreciated on their repeated and much painted Southern Inspection Tours.

In the prized Han Confucian scholarly manner, Emperor Kangxi further named 36 notable architectural highlights with each in four Chinese characters, such as Danbo jingcheng 澹泊敬诚 (frugality and sincerity) for the main hall of the palace facing the front gate. In emulation, his grandson, Emperor Qianlong, named additional 36 sites but in three Chinese characters, such as Yanyulou 烟雨楼 (chamber of mist and rain), modeled after the same in Jiaxing 嘉兴 near Hangzhou. He completed this summer retreat in 1792. Beyond the 10,000 meters of great walls surrounding
this grandest of all imperial parks stand eight important Buddhist temples in Sino-Tibetan style. This intercultural ethnic combination of nomadic versus sedentary styles marked an innovation in Chinese garden design, not seen previously or elsewhere. In 1994 UNESCO recognized Mountain Villa and the outer eight Buddhist temples in Chengde as World Culture Heritage Sites.

Occupying an area of 564 hectares, this summer retreat was twice as large as the Summer Palace, the original Yuanming Yuan (park of circular brightness, an allusion to Buddhist wisdom), built in the capital of Beijing from 1736-1795. It contained several smaller gardens, two of which are now the leafy campuses of China’s premier Beijing and Qinghua University, each with lotus ponds.

Emperor Qianlong was especially fond of western architecture as novel ornaments in his garden landscapes. During the 18th century, despite general suppression of Christianity, several Jesuit artists worked at the Qing court. They first gained notice by Emperor Qianlong’s father, Emperor Yongzheng who genuinely appreciated their contribution to the arts beyond the propaganda value exploited by both Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong. The Jesuit collaboration with Chinese artists resulted in a fusion of Chinese and European painting styles, as evidenced in the set of engravings of the commissioned work by the best known artist, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). LANG Shining 郎士宁 in Chinese. Though not an architect, Castiglione nonetheless oversaw the design of six rococo buildings with water fountains in Yuanmin Yuan for Emperor Qianlong. The works began in 1747, completed in 1783.

The original Yuanming Yuan was but one of five gardens, as the northwest of Beijing in the 18th century claimed fame for its Three Hills of Longevity, Fragrance, and Jade Spring (万寿，香，玉泉) and Five Gardens of Joyful Spring, Circular Brightness, Appropriate Quietude, Quiet Clarity, and Pure Ripples (畅春園，圓明園，靜宜園，靜明園，清漪園). Most gardens were looted and ravaged by the British and French forces in 1860 and again in 1900 by the Eight-Nation Alliance (Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States) during the Boxer Rebellion. Only the grandest Mountain Villa in distant Chengde remained intact. Today, after two decades of restoration, it now shows well-preserved contemporaneous imperial regalia and architecture amidst forested hills and lotus-filled lakes. Notably, still visible today is the multilingual text in Manchurian, Mongolian, Tibetan and Chinese—exemplary of interculturality—carved on stone stele commemorating the multiple aims and the construction of this grand imperial garden park.7

The omnipresent lotus in all these imperial gardens is a metaphor of purity emerging from mud, popular in Buddhist iconography. Just as Confucianism and Daoism originated around 5th century BCE, so too did Buddhism then but in South Asia. Mediated through Central Asia, Buddhism arrived in China in the first centuries. Over time, the Chinese faithful had acculturated the incoming Mahayana Buddhism (Greater Vehicle) and made it into their own kind of Buddhism. To counter the three teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism, the Qing emperors patronized a different kind of Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism (Diamond Vehicle), also known as Tantric Buddhism, evolved in Tibet since the seventh century with an emphasis on rituals guided by a venerated teacher of the Dharma (law), known as Lama in Tibetan. Though already present in late Tang China (618-907) but much shrouded in mystery, Vajrayana Buddhism received patronage from the Mongol rulers (1279-1367) and then the Manchus. The latter’s support was substantive. In 1766, the circularly domed Pule Temple (universal happiness) was constructed as a three-dimensional mandala for the study of Vajrayana. It holds many exquisite sculptures in gilt bronze, hitherto largely restricted to the initiated for viewing. In 1767 Putuo zongcheng Temple (普陀宗乘之廟) was erected to replicate the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. In 1780 Emperor Qianlong celebrated his 70th birthday with the arrival of the Sixth Panchen Lama from Tibet that year by installing the latter in the Xumi Fushou Temple (of happiness and longevity atop Sumeru Mountain). It was purpose built near the Mountain Villa to Avoid the Heat after Panchen Lama’s Zhaxilunbu monastery in Tibet.

In sharp contrast, the Qing emperors shunned Christianity in the 18th century. As Emperor Kangxi was keen to learn of western technology, especially astronomy and cartography brought by the Jesuits, he had issued an Edict of Toleration (of Catholics) in 1692. However, in 1715 when Pope Clement XI officially condemned Chinese Confucian rites as in conflict with the Church, Emperor Kangxi recanted his blessings and instead, forbade Christian missions in China. His two successors did not deviate from this official line of repudiation, even though in private, Emperor Qianlong delighted in western curiosities such as water fountains in gardens and chiming clocks for palace interiors.

Western perceptions of China were equally ethnocentric. For example, a scene of alien Chinese funerary procession was rendered as idealized Arcadia, as an implicit extension of western imperialism even in the imaginary (print by Bernard Picart of 1723). Chinese-looking figures wearing Chinese-looking clothing are shown in a landscape from the characteristic European single-vanishing point perspective with
distant heavenly clouds. It is akin to speaking single Romanized Chinese words using English syntax. Western commissions of porcelain generated a vibrant trade of export-ware that sharply differed from luxury porcelain of imperial taste. A ship bearing a foreign flag summarized the foreigners’ commercial interest as much as a five-clawed dragon, the Chinese emperor’s authority and reign (dishes on display).

In modern China, the Chinese (93% Han) recognize early Qing emperors’ efforts of acculturation as their own integrated heritage. What is more eloquent than bamboo, the symbol of an upright Confucian scholar who could bend with the wind and not break, painted by Pu Quan (1913–1991), a cousin of the last Qing Emperor Pu Yi (1906–1967) as synecdoche of the ultimate Han Chinese garden? Or, from our perspective today, is the imperial legacy really a lament for the landscaped paradise now gone? Past imperial gardens in China are now public parks, owned by the state in the name of the people.

Endnotes

1 For facilitating part of this research in the summer of 2011, thanks go to the Office of Confucius Institutes at Beijing Language and Culture University, partner of the Confucius Institute for Culture, Language and Business at McMaster University.
5 Fôret, Phillipe. Mapping Chengde: the Qing Landscape Enterprise (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2000).
6 Wong, Young-Tsu. A Paradise Lost, the Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan (Honolulu, University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).

Angela Y. Sheng PhD is an Associate Professor in the School of the Arts and Director Chair of the Confucius Institute at McMaster University. She is the author of numerous publications dealing with the transfer of technological and artistic ideas between China and Central Asia. One area of her research is costumes and textiles, both as functional art and as documentation of human negotiation with others and with time, place, and space for personal and social reasons.