

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Patricia Berger/Empire of Emptiness

is published by University of Hawai'i Press and copyrighted, © 2003, by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Introduction: Raining Flowers

O great King, listen to how
Your body will be adorned
With the thirty-two signs
Of a great being,
Through proper honoring of stupas,
Honorable beings, Superiors, and the elderly
You will become a Universal Monarch,
Your glorious hands and feet marked with [a design of] wheels.

—Nāgārjuna, Precious Garland,
trans. Jeffrey Hopkins

In 1753, Hongli, the Qianlong emperor of the Manchu Qing dynasty, had himself painted into the role of Buddhism’s greatest layman, the Licchavi merchant Vimalakīrti (Plate 1). The artist, a court painter named Ding Guanpeng, took no chances with this important commission. He chose a composition that had been in use since as early as the fifth century to illustrate the sutra in which Vimalakīrti takes a starring role: the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* (Teachings of Vimalakīrti). Like many other early illustrations of the story, Ding’s *Bu’er tu* (“Not Two,” or “Nonduality Picture”) seats the savvy merchant Vimalakīrti on the right facing his visitor and partner in debate, Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. The topic occupying them is nonduality and the apprehension of emptiness. The moment in the story Ding gives us appears in the sutra’s seventh chapter, when a beautiful goddess, a longtime resident of Vimalakīrti’s house, appears and throws flowers over the gathered company surrounding Mañjuśrī. These raining blossoms glide gracefully over the many spiritually advanced bodhisattvas who are present, but they stick conspicuously to everyone else. Most annoyed—and visibly so in Ding’s painting—is the Buddha’s disciple Śāriputra, who tries futilely to shake the flowers off. When the goddess asks what he and his monastic brothers are doing, he answers:

“Goddess, these flowers are not proper for religious persons and so we are trying to shake them off.”

The goddess said, “Do not say that, reverend Śāriputra. Why? These flowers are proper indeed! Such flowers have neither constructual thought nor discrimination. But the elder Śāriputra has both constructual thought and discrimination.”¹

Shortly after this pointed and embarrassing exchange, Śāriputra (who plays the worrywort and butt of Vimalakīrti’s jibes throughout this often comical sutra) asks the goddess how, if she is such an advanced being, she finds herself still occupying the inferior body of a woman. Not wasting too many words, the goddess switches bodies with Śāriputra, leaving him aghast. In a brief but effective defense of the notion that all forms are impermanent, transitory, and illusory, she wryly asks: “Reverend Śāriputra, what prevents you from changing out of your female state?” And Śāriputra is forced to concede: “I do not know what to transform!”

Ding's composition mirrors ancient and authoritative versions of the scene that underscore the theme of nonduality in a seemingly paradoxical way: by dividing everything neatly into twos. As was often the case in his practice, the painter creatively interprets a work already in the emperor's collection, a handscroll that may have been done by the Jin-dynasty painter Ma Yunqing (who was himself inspired by the Northern Song painter Li Gonglin).² Ding's rendition is also complicated and enriched by his deployment of two or more disjunctive styles of representation. The combination of the emperor's distinctive—and disturbingly present—face with the bland, anonymous faces and agitated, archaic line that describes the garments of the gathered crowd, which casts the knowing viewer back to moments and monuments in Buddhism's specifically Chinese past,³ ultimately hints at the dissolution of a different two—a mythic, Indian past (or, perhaps more aptly, a moment in the history of Chinese art) and a Qing-dynasty present—into one.

The effectiveness of Ding's painting depends, of course, on the text of the sutra, a text not provided for the viewer to consult but which ends famously by casting the usefulness of language into doubt. It is this culminating moment that Qianlong alludes to in his poetic inscription. Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī have been discussing emptiness in a typically long, florid exchange. Offering an insightful summation, Mañjuśrī seems to have captured the essence of it. The floor is now Vimalakīrti's and, in a brilliant tour de force, he chooses to remain silent—a moment of speechless eloquence so profound that it has come to be called the “lion's roar,” the moment when a bodhisattva reaches the tenth, final stage of development. Qianlong writes:

Vimalakīrti silently rested—
 Mañjuśrī said, “Skillful!”
 This is truly entering nonduality,
 Not speaking is what right conduct ought to be.
 But understanding in silence,
 Seizing shadowy form, what is empty becomes full.
 Say—how can you make a picture like this?
 The sound we hear is a laugh: “Ha, ha!”⁴

Mañjuśrī capitulates in complete admiration and the debate comes to an end with every listener raised up several levels on the enlightenment path.⁵

Qianlong's elegant and very private pictorial conceit, which he kept at Bishushanzhuang, the Manchu summer retreat at Chengde (also known as Rehe or Jehol), northeast of Beijing, must have been doubly piquant to those favored few who had seen it there. For it was in Chengde, among other select sites, that Qianlong played out before an audience of privileged Chinese, Mongolian, and other Inner Asian subjects one of his more famous, if limited, public roles as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom and denizen of China's own Wutaishan. Thus already securely identified with Mañjuśrī in the minds of his guests, in this painting he chooses the guise of Vimalakīrti, a layman so advanced that, by eschewing speech, he outshone one of the greatest bodhisattvas, whom he happens to embody himself. What better way to represent nonduality and the contingency of form?

The enlightened layman Vimalakīrti occupied Qianlong's private musings throughout his life, but never more so than in the 1750s, a decade during which, in his late thirties and forties, he devoted considerable energy to Buddhist practice and patronage.⁶ His ten volumes of collected Chinese-language poems reveal he returned to the subject of the goddess' “rain of flowers” many times over, as in 1754, when he wrote a poem titled “Hall of Raining Flowers” (“Yuhuashi”). In it he reiterated his desire to “manifest emptiness,” just as Vimalakīrti had done:

During the three months of spring I came to a peaceful, quiet lodging
 Where, for five days, I practiced pure amusements.
 Each time I chanted I took a turn and
 Discrimination returned.
 On the other side of the window, the vaporous shadow of a kingfisher—
 I enter and sit in solitude in the cypress's shade
 To put Vimalakīrti's investigations to the test,
 So that I might yet manifest emptiness.⁷

“Hall of Raining Flowers” (and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* itself) pivots on the shifting quality of things as “the vaporous shadow of a kingfisher” strikes a responsive chord that pushes Qianlong into solitude to test Vimalakīrti's silent method. Yet the poem and Ding Guanpeng's painting both throw into relief one of the most significant paradoxes in Qianlong's practice (in fact, in the practice of Buddhism in general): The construction of a path to enlightenment and the apprehension of emptiness must take place in a sensory world filled with desirable, fascinating things. Qianlong's own enthusiastic engagement with the material world is well known and has been the object of considerable (often negative) critique.⁸ Judging from the outpouring from his court workshops, this emperor was obsessed with things and could not or would not stop proliferating and collecting substantial, tangible, material objects in all their discriminating shapes and sizes. A flood of what has been variously characterized as excessive ornament or bloated overdecoration, ever-growing collections of works of art and craft in all the media of the day, productions in which one medium masqueraded as another, miniature and gigantic objects—all occupied his delighted gaze up until the end of his very long life in 1799. His regular and, by most evidence, sincere Buddhist practice was consumed by the construction of chains of temples,⁹ each conceptually linked to an earlier model, and by the design and fabrication of huge pantheons of hundreds of carefully individualized deities, the production of “corrected” replicas of some of the most charismatic icons of the past, and the composition and publication of edicts and inscriptions to launch his projects properly into history.

Qianlong's creative use of forms took on an especially significant twist when, between 1750 and 1757, he oversaw and funded the construction of a meditation chapel, the Pavilion of Raining Flowers (Yuhuage), in the northwestern sector of the Forbidden City. This undisguised homage to the wisdom of Vimalakīrti's shape-shifting household goddess, who used the impermanent forms of flowers to test who-was-who at Vimalakīrti's house, was filled with hundreds of Tibetan-style sculptures, three-dimensional mandalas, and thangkas (Tibetan-style hanging scrolls), all assembled and put into order by Qianlong's Tibeto-Mongolian guru, the Zhangjia Khutukhtu and National Preceptor, Rolpay Dorje, also known by the Sanskrit translation of his name, Lalitavajra (1717–1786). The Pavilion of Raining Flowers was intentionally reconstructed as a “tower of forms” that was really not what it seemed, since it concealed four separate floors of images, outlining a carefully graduated, four-step path to enlightenment, behind a facade that promised only three. This project markedly asserted the transience and phenomenality of material form, yet it also simultaneously promoted the view that form has value not simply as support for the unenlightened, stumbling seeker. Form, in the Pavilion of Raining Flowers, is also inextricably enmeshed with its own transcendence in the paradox of the Double Truth: the identity of samsara (the phenomenal world of the senses) and nirvana, the ultimate, irreversible goal of Buddhist practice in which the true, contingent nature of things is revealed.

The rich Tibetan-style contents of the Pavilion of Raining Flowers pose an intriguing cultural counterpoint to Ding Guanpeng's Chinese-style portrait of Qianlong-as-Vimalakīrti. The *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, one of the most influential and enduring texts in Chinese Buddhism, has long been beloved

as a tract that justifies the layman's path as a worthy alternative to celibate monasticism. Despite his worldliness, Vimalakīrti is enlightened and the master of what Robert Thurman has translated as "liberative technique," the outreaching compassion that, when combined with wisdom, results in enlightenment.¹⁰ Vimalakīrti's own liberation, foreshadowing the esoteric techniques of Vajrayāna Buddhism, is in fact gained *because* of his open engagement with the world of form rather than in spite of it. But his allure for Chinese Buddhists had to do with more than just his status as a liberated layman. Even in very early Chinese illustrations of the sutra, his representation merges imperceptibly but thoroughly with images of Daoist immortals and venerable recluses. The description of Vimalakīrti's thin, disease-ravaged body, a ruse he designed and magically projected to attract Śākya-muni's sympathy and elicit a personal visit, likewise recalls the dried, husklike bodies of practitioners of Daoist longevity regimens. His concern for his family and his moral uprightness (among other things, he went to brothels but remained chaste) reminded admirers of the virtuous actions and "inner reclusion" of loyal officials trapped in the service of corrupt rulers. Despite his foreignness, he seemed also to be a perfect exemplar of Chinese cultural values, both Daoist and Confucian.

Qianlong's use of Vimalakīrti's persona and teachings therefore transcended easy cultural or sectarian categorization. Moreover, his embodiment of Vimalakīrti in painting, poetry, and architecture informs two quite distinct Buddhist roles he defined for himself: the emperor as an enlightened Chinese layman living in this world (as in his portrait by Ding Guanpeng) and as a *cakravartin*, or wheel-turning sovereign and emanation of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, presiding over a clarified field of enlightened activity (as during his regular practice in the Pavilion of Raining Flowers). In a certain sense, Vimalakīrti enabled Qianlong to reconcile this particularly sticky aspect of the Double Truth. If the practitioner is enjoined to model himself on the Buddha, following a gradual discipline that bears fruit only after countless aeons, he must also anticipate, if only intellectually, that the enlightened state corresponds to realization of timeless emptiness. The Double Truth recognizes that enlightenment can only be found in the world of the senses; it is built on the premise that path and goal are the same. Its first paradigm—samsara—stresses the shifting, temporally fluid nature of things, calling for an awareness of the equally contingent nature of the self. But the Double Truth also puts forward a second paradigm—nirvana—in which time is replaced by a transcendent vision of the cosmos with the enlightened Buddha—potentially the practitioner himself—at its center.

Recently Charles Orzech has argued that this seeming contradiction also permitted, even demanded, political interpretation—particularly in esoteric Vajrayāna, or "Diamond Vehicle," Buddhism, which first had a significant impact on Chinese concepts of rulership during the second half of the Tang dynasty (618–906) and certainly formed the core of Qing imperial Buddhist practice in its Tibetan form.¹¹ Orzech's study focuses on the *Scripture of Perfected Wisdom for Humane Kings Who Wish to Protect Their States* (*Renwang huguo boruoboluomituo jing*), which was, as he argues, most likely a Chinese apocryphal text "translated" into Chinese in the fifth century and again, with significant transformations, by the esoteric master Bukong Jingang (Amoghavajra) in the later eighth century at the behest of the Tang emperor Daizong (r. 763–779). The text outlines a concept that is fundamental to Vajrayāna Buddhism—that ritual action has two distinct benefits, inner and outer. In Vajrayāna practice, ritual performance allows practitioners to imagine themselves as enlightened beings, but it also results in conspicuous rewards that can be directed to the community at large by means of an accommodating "grammar" and elaborate "vocabulary" of ritual action. Thus Vajrayāna Buddhism offers hope of practical realization of the Double Truth—the simultaneous achievement of worldly and transcendent goals in what Orzech terms "the recursive cosmos of ritual performance." From the perspective of the Manchu emperors of the Qing dynasty, as for many Chinese emperors before them, the Diamond Vehicle (along with Confucianism and Daoism) provided an ideal path for historically conscious political action *and* personal cultivation.

Empire of Shifting Forms

These issues of duality, even plurality, of private identity and public presentation were all part of the shifting landscape the Manchu emperors of the Qing dynasty faced as their culturally complex empire grew. The Qing empire reached its greatest size under Qianlong. Territories stretching far into Xinjiang (the “New Borderlands”) were added to the territory of the Manchu homeland, China proper, Inner and Outer Mongolia, and, for all practical purposes, Tibet, through a series of “Ten Great Campaigns,” the subject of extensive, boastful poeticizing on the emperor’s part. The phenomenon of the ever-expanding frontier brought the Qing emperors and their government into fluctuating contact with subjects from increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.¹² This contact was to a certain extent controlled and organized by the elaborate guest ritual of the Ministry Ruling the Outer Provinces (Lifanyuan) that demanded certain subjects undertake an annual *chaojin* to the Qing capital at Beijing and the Chengde summer retreat—what Ning Chia has translated as a “pilgrimage to court.” Others, including the stream of Tibetan lamas who visited Beijing and other Qing-controlled areas regularly, came to *chaogong*, “pay tribute.”¹³ To all of these guests Qianlong, in particular, paid the supreme compliment (for so he certainly saw it) of learning their languages so that he could converse with them without the mediation of an interpreter. This habit of language study, which carried his imperial ancestors’ forbearance for and interest in other cultures to unprecedented lengths and which he continued even into his seventies, may seem, if only superficially, to contradict his equally adamant assertion and creative reinterpretation of Manchu identity. But it may be, in fact, precisely what constituted Manchuness at the imperial level.

A new generation of Qing historians spent the 1990s debating exactly what this new construction of a cultural identity might mean for a group of people who were historically vague until their mid-seventeenth-century consolidation of Manchuria and conquest of Inner Mongolia and China. Among them Mark Elliott, with a broad and deep reading of Manchu-language documents, has carefully crafted a picture of what the “Manchu Way” comprised in political, social, ethnic, and legal terms; others, especially Evelyn Rawski and Pamela Crossley, have explored the complex, multicultural Qing concept of rulership, which had several different sources in China and Inner Asia.¹⁴ The Manchu language, which has experienced a resurgence of interest among Qing scholars ever since Beatrice Bartlett’s seminal *Monarchs and Ministers* appeared in 1991,¹⁵ was an aspect of Manchu culture that was, more or less, legislated into conformity by the confederation of loosely related tribes that eventually chose to call themselves Manchu. Manchu vocabulary, owing small but growing debts to Mongolian and Chinese, was ultimately established and controlled by fiat and stabilized into official form in the several dictionary projects Qianlong subsidized. Though this legislation of a national or dynastic language (Chinese: *guohua* or *chaohua*) under Qianlong suggests the importance the Manchus themselves eventually placed on language as a marker of cultural difference, these concerns actually surfaced very early. Some of the earliest writings in the Manchu language detail the new dynasty’s conscious and well-reasoned borrowing of the Mongolian alphabet to create a written version of their own language and, with it, the possibility of a new historical literature of themselves. The Manchus’ refusal to give up what they convinced themselves were “traditional” Manchu ways (defined and codified after the conquest), their ever more ritualized reenactment of a unified sense of Manchuness in their annual retreats to the regions beyond the Great Wall, their emphasis, especially in pictorial representations of themselves, on hunting, archery, and horsemanship—all suggest that they saw significant political benefit in remaining forever “other” in the eyes of the majority of those they ruled, the Han Chinese.

Nonetheless all the Qing emperors, most prominently Qianlong, often behaved like their Chinese subjects in the privacy of their own quarters and in the performance of many of their ritual

responsibilities.¹⁶ Qianlong's daily diaries, for example, document the fact that he spent part of most afternoons in pursuit of specifically Chinese cultural activities—poetry, painting, and calligraphy—engaged in a personal (though ultimately publicized) reverie that allowed him to occupy a Chinese mind and body, however transiently. Ding Guanpeng's Chinese-style portrait of the emperor as Vimalakirti, which Qianlong kept at Chengde, suggests that he contemplated this culturally complicated role privately even as he received pilgrimages from his Mongol subjects at the summer retreat. Even so, it would be difficult to argue that Qianlong ever understood himself as simply Chinese. Despite his clear admiration for certain aspects of Chinese culture and the Sinitic flavor of many of his court productions, all evidence points to the fact that he was, at the very least, fluent and at home in more than one culture. His daily Buddhist practice, largely but not exclusively carried out according to the reformist, Gelukpa (or Yellow Hat) tenets of Tibetan Buddhism, provides an especially broad window into understanding this fluid sense of self.

For these reasons it is, I believe, difficult to maintain that the Manchu emperors' increasingly easy multilingualism and their continued interest in and respect for cultural difference (certainly up to and including the Qianlong reign) was an epiphenomenal by-product of their political needs. In certain ways, their cultural and personal fluency was the very characteristic that defined them most surely, just as much as cultural fluency and bilingualism—the Hellenized veneer laid over Italic culture—defined the Romans and their empire. But unlike the Roman Empire in its heyday, when all roads led predictably to Rome, the Qing empire was pan-Asian and decentered. As James Hevia has put it: “A central precept in the Qing imagining of empire was the notion that the world was made up of a multitude of lords over whom Manchu emperors sought to position themselves as overlord.”¹⁷ This was not a political model that developed after the Manchus found themselves masters of many different cultural groups but one that emerged strikingly in the early years of the empire, designed consciously to emulate patterns established centuries before during the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1280–1368). Once the Manchus' main capital was moved from Mukden (Chinese: Shengjing, modern Shenyang) to Beijing, they still refused to remain stationary for long but kept moving between several different residences (some of them movable Mongolian-style *ger*, or yurts) in an annual transhumance that, during Qianlong's reign, became established tradition. This pattern of movement, which was clearly articulated during the reign of the Kangxi emperor, Qianlong's grandfather, took the court from Beijing to their summer retreat at Chengde, to other summer residences just outside of Beijing, and beyond: to Changchun and Wutaishan, a site sacred to both Chinese and Mongolian Buddhists, to Dolonnor in Inner Mongolia, and, following early Chinese imperial precedents, on regular tours of the northern and southern regions of China proper.

If the earlier Qing emperors did not fall into a pattern of hermetically sealing themselves within the Forbidden City, emerging only on ritual occasions to perform the responsibilities of office, even Qianlong, one of the most mobile of his lineage, had only secondhand experience of large portions of his empire, significantly Xinjiang, Outer Mongolia, and Tibet. Tibet especially was a realm of the imagination for him—one of several imaginaries he set about constructing both mentally, in his Buddhist practice, and materially and symbolically in his artistic and architectural projects in Beijing and especially in the world-in-miniature he built on his grandfather's foundations at Chengde. Modeling the overall form of the empire in visual terms ultimately became a prime focus in his life, as if representing it at a scale that the eye could scan and the mind encompass would “make it so.” The model had to conform to the original but, as we will see, the reverse was also true as Qianlong's modeling became more and more an effort of revision and editing. More and more the interpretation of the original was also forced to live up to the expectations of the copy.

Balancing on the Hyphen

This complex modeling process brings us to two points. The first is that artistic representation—the creation of a visual world of symbolic, meaningful form of which Buddhist art was just a part—occupied a significant place in the Manchu project of empire building. The second is that the theory and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, adopted in the decade before the Manchus' conquest of China, offered not just political advantages in the emperor's relations with his Inner Asian subjects but also a proven method to envision a complex system of things in crystal clear, materially substantial, often architectural, terms.¹⁸

The emperor's own artisan workshops were just as decentered as the empire itself. Artists and craftsmen from all over China, Mongolia, and Tibet collaborated on projects that included scholarly, Chinese-style landscapes, portraits, decorative paintings, Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and shamanist ritual objects, enameled wares, furniture, and finely crafted storage boxes to hold all of the above.¹⁹ Other types of Buddhist and non-Buddhist objects—lacquerware, ceramics, and textiles—were produced for the court in the great manufacturing cities of the south from designs set in Beijing, often with the oversight of Qianlong's guru, Rolpay Dorje. The continued presence at court of European Jesuits, who in Qianlong's day were corralled into artistic production and restricted from missionizing (which they understood was a long slide from their heyday under his grandfather Kangxi, who valued their scientific and mathematical skills), contributed substantially to the creation of modes of depiction that addressed multiple goals and diverse audiences.

What we might term the overall visual culture of the Qianlong period, in other words, cannot be categorized in simple terms but, to borrow a linguistic metaphor, often seems to speak in several languages simultaneously, representing a range of hybrids that maps out the world as the Manchus understood it, with all of its shaded, ambiguous zones of cultural interaction. This may explain why art historians have struggled to find a terminology that does justice to the complexity of production at the Qianlong court. One particularly thorny problem is the art that was made at court to serve the emperor's practice of Tibetan-style Buddhism. For here we enter into a realm of orthodox, authorized imagination where we might expect cultural differences to dissolve and dualities to disappear, but which has always been politically charged, ever more so given the present, strained relationship between the Chinese government and Tibet. The series of neologisms or hyphenated terms currently in use among Western writers—Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Chinese, Lamaist, International Gelukpa style—all seem conspicuously designed to highlight the collage-like juxtaposition of representational intent these works embody. But as we focus on this corpus of work as a manifestation of a larger project, we are forced to ask what effect these contested, hybridized terms have on the way we view the Tibetan-style Buddhist products of the Qing imperial workshops: How does the teeter-tottering hyphen alter our own expectations of inspiration and practice?

Form and Emptiness

More than any other type of Buddhist meditation, Vajrayāna practice depends on form and its manipulation and proliferation. Buddhist masters of the Diamond Vehicle—originally in India but, after the tenth century, primarily in Tibet—developed an extensive repertory of visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile supports to aid initiates, including mandalas (architecturally conceived diagrams of complex buddha fields and all their inhabitants, which take form as image-filled buildings, sculptural groups, or, most typically, as paintings that read like architectural plans), codified, language-like utter-

ances (mantras and *dhāraṇī*), chanting, incense, body postures (*āsana*), and hand gestures (*mudrā*). All of these depend on the ability of the initiate to remember, recall, and recognize his or her own buddha nature through a series of *samādhi* (meditative states), to reconfigure in the recursive arena of ritual performance the triple, contingent landscapes of body, speech, and mind, and to bring them into a unified state that conforms to enlightened buddhahood.

In directing this path, Vajrayāna texts and images characteristically deliver information and insight in several different registers at once, some of them deeply encoded or intentionally hidden in plain view so as to bring the viewer up short like a quotation from a foreign language in the midst of an otherwise completely transparent text. Images, for example, might incorporate language in the pictorial field as script or hint at orality through visual puns or rebuses. Likewise inscriptions might be designed to be read several ways (or in different directions) or to block access to signification in the quotidian sense even when clearly pronounceable. The flexibility these texts and images require in terms of audience response—the ability to leap seamlessly from one register to the next (or, in Qianlong’s practice, from one language or visual style to another)—is what makes Vajrayāna training so arduous and so dependent on transmission through a lineage of acknowledged masters. What is expressed and transferred through a multiplicity of multivalent, divinized forms are qualities of body, speech, and mind. These forms establish patterns that initiates must come to recognize as their own. Thus Vajrayāna requires the kind of imaginative role playing we see Qianlong engaging in as he assumes the identity, for example, of Vimalakīrti or projects himself as Mañjuśrī. Vajrayāna’s goal is for the actor to enter his role so thoroughly that no distinction remains between the two: The path becomes the goal and vice versa.

One of Rolpay Dorje’s two biographies, written in Tibetan by his disciple Thukwan Losang Chökyi Nyima, provides significant insight into the emperor’s study, practice, and questioning of Buddhism.²⁰ Thukwan reports that Qianlong first underwent initiation into Tibetan Buddhist practice in 1745, almost a decade after he ascended to power, and he documents Rolpay Dorje’s advice to the emperor on matters ranging from Tibetan politics and military campaigns in the borderlands to the proper sequencing of the graduated path to enlightenment. Much of what Thukwan says about public affairs is corroborated in official histories of the Qing dynasty and in historical records compiled in Mongolia, but his notes on the emperor’s practice are unparalleled elsewhere. From him we learn that Qianlong worried constantly about the difficulties of translation from one language to another or from one representational style to another—about the hazards that any sort of mediating mechanism could pose to a serious disciple of the enlightenment path. How, he wondered, could the pure sound of mantras be accurately transcribed in Chinese characters? How could Manchu Buddhists develop a monastic community of their own or a canon translated into their own language without diluting the potency of the Buddha’s original teaching? How should Buddhist temples be designed? How should images be proportioned? There were also more philosophical questions focusing on core Buddhist concepts, among them nonduality and emptiness, two related issues that Qianlong engaged repeatedly until the end of his long life in 1799. These intriguing problems had long since been addressed in the Mādhyamika or Middle Way philosophy of Nāgārjuna, to which the Gelukpa founder, Tsongkhapa, wrote an important commentary. Thukwan tells us that Rolpay Dorje recommended Tsongkhapa’s commentary to the emperor for study and that he even lectured on it for an assembled group of the emperor’s closest associates. The Middle Way offered a Buddhist perspective that accepted the existence of the world as we experience it while also suggesting a scheme unperceived by all but the most advanced beings for comprehending how everything fits together into an interrelated, nondualistic, constantly shifting whole.²¹

As the Qing emperors worked to expand and stabilize their increasingly polyglot, culturally diverse empire, their actions seem very much in keeping with this Buddhist message. The Manchus never

totally conformed to the thesis promoted in the mid-twentieth century by John King Fairbank, who argued that they envisioned their empire as “concentric rings of progressively lesser-civilized peoples radiating out from a pure Sinic center in China proper.”²² Although they certainly projected this idealized and essentialist view as they faced their Chinese subjects, when they turned outward they simultaneously saw the empire as a confederation of discrete, culturally distinct blocks. Their imperial philosophy also contrasts sharply with the attitudes of modern Chinese regimes, including the present one, which have promoted sinicization of the frontiers as movement *back* toward a historical ideal. Thus while contemporary China occupies almost the same landmass as the Qing empire did at its greatest extent (excluding Outer Mongolia), its leaders contend that non-Han territories to the north and west have always been an inalienable part of China, not pawns in an ideological construction serving early modern Chinese nationalism. As James A. Millward says in his discussion of current Chinese attitudes toward Xinjiang (though we might apply his insights to Tibet or Mongolia as well), “investigation of the frontier as *process* is precluded by the ahistorical treatment of the region as a static, eternally Chinese *place*.”²³

These two cosmologies—the one changing, the other static—are strikingly counterposed and reconciled in Vajrayāna Buddhism, where the temporally and physically bound individual disciple seeks to realize a spacious and spatial view of reality and thus bring two very different experiences together in ritual to produce benefits that are both personal and public. The assumptions of Vajrayāna thus preempt to a certain extent the critique that has been repeatedly launched against the Qing emperors (and their Mongol predecessors during the Yuan)—the critique which questions the sincerity of their Buddhist practice and claims that the extensive political benefits they realized, particularly among their Inner Asian tributaries, were achieved cynically by simply going through the motions. Strangely this critique does not extend itself to the Qing emperors’ Confucian practice, which has been taken as a sign of their ready and complete sinicization and capitulation to a classical Chinese worldview.²⁴ I think the Qing emperors saw benefits in both practices that were more than merely cynical. The real problem may be in attempting to lash these culturally adept chameleons to any single view of the world they ruled. Much of the visual and verbal art they patronized and deployed for a larger audience demonstrates their ongoing effort to reconcile everyday events and ordinary human differences with the paradigmatic models of history and cosmology they borrowed from several different systems of thought. If the syncretic concept and realization of “three doctrines united into one” (*sanjiao heyi*)—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—occupied Chinese intellectuals during the late Ming and Qing, the Qing emperors, particularly Qianlong, sought synthesis on many different levels, not the least of which was their very careful design of a new, Buddhist visual culture.

Qing Translations of Buddhist Art and Practice

Of all the Qing emperors, the fourth, Qianlong, was the most enthusiastic in his support of Tibetan-style Buddhism—indeed, in his assiduous attention to ritual practice in general. It might be argued (and it is admittedly an underlying assumption of this book) that the influence of Tibetan Buddhism peaked in China during Qianlong’s reign, particularly during the lifetime of his boyhood friend and National Preceptor, Rolpay Dorje. In fact, several of the apparent contradictions in Qianlong’s own Buddhist life (most notoriously his edict of 1792, *Lama Shuo*, in which he excoriates the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist establishment for their complicity in the Gurkha invasion of Tibet and claims his own long support of Buddhism as merely expedient) can be explained, at least in part, by Rolpay Dorje’s death in 1786. Despite Qianlong’s central position in the patronage of Buddhism in China, Mongolia, and Tibet, the story that unfolds in the following pages is not intended as a biography of him in his prodigious role as a religious practitioner and protector. This is a subject too vast and

complicated to fit easily between the covers of any book (or at least this one). My focus instead is on the broad range of visual materials produced in and for the Qing court in the service of both Buddhist practice and Inner Asian diplomacy—and, in semiotic terms, what and how they meant and now mean. Several pressing issues emerge from this variously hybridized body of work, a few of which have begun to pique the interest of Qing historians, such as Susan Naquin, Pamela Crossley, Evelyn Rawski, and Angela Zito,²⁵ and, to a much lesser extent, art historians.²⁶ Among these issues are the nature of the Manchu rulers' use of Buddhist images as a way of establishing themselves as religious kings, their concern for visual precedents and orthodox form, their desire to categorize and schematize their huge collections of art, their unique approach to the visual imbrication of the mundane and supermundane, their multilingualism and its echo in visual practice, and their efforts to reconcile memory and the construction of history in visual terms.

Chapter 1 begins with a painting produced in Qianlong's midcareer. Titled *Ten Thousand Dharmas Return as One*, it introduces a cast of characters drawn from several different parts of Inner Asia and an artistic practice that was conspicuously collaborative, even in 1771. *Ten Thousand Dharmas*, also known as *The Return of the Torghuts*, celebrates the joined birthdays of Qianlong and his mother, the Empress Dowager Xiaosheng, at Chengde and the coincidental return of the Mongolian Torghut tribe to the Qing empire in the same year. Qianlong ultimately used this politically significant painting as a backdrop for his annual reception of the Mongol tribes at Chengde and for the singular visit of the Sixth Panchen Lama there in 1780—demonstrating “in the recursive arena of ritual” the confluence and resonance of past and present events and his ability to propel this understanding of them into the future. The painting is a triumph of the collaged style that distinguishes so much of Qing court production, posing straightforward, European-style portraits of the group gathered to honor the emperor and his guests against a Tibetan-style, magically revealed setting replete with auspicious signs. It does all this within an architectural setting, the Putuozechongmiao, that replicates the Dalai Lama's Potala in Lhasa and with a composition borrowed from a mural in the same Potala depicting the 1642 meeting in Beijing between the first Qing Shunzhi emperor and the Great Fifth Dalai Lama.

What can Qianlong have meant by ordering this painting? Its multiple references back to the historical past—Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan—reveal the degree to which the Qing relied upon Mongolian and Tibetan precedents in their self-creation as rulers of Inner Asia. Their Buddhist practice had a Mongolian source, as David Farquhar, Samuel Grupper, and others have shown,²⁷ and their visual culture owed huge debts to seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Mongolian art. Yet the Buddhist art of the Qing court was also cautiously designed to deliver a complex but unified message in several different languages simultaneously, all the while effectively producing a reconciliation of the Double Truth: an orderly, mandalic, spatially conceived view of a world that was nonetheless inhabited by familiar, memorable faces.

Images are notoriously “dense,” to borrow a term from Nelson Goodman.²⁸ They defy simplification; they are typically multivalent, offering different readings to different viewers, whose expectations and assumptions may change over time. They also pose immense problems in translation—much knottier even than the problems encountered in translating text. How, for example, was the immense Tibetan pantheon of symbolically rich, divine forms, recorded verbally in such texts as the *Niṣpannayogāvalī* and other collections of *sādhana* (realizations) or instructions for constructing mandalas, to be rendered visually so as to be both correct (incorporating all the right attributes) and identifiable (producing the same experience of recognition in the practitioner)? How could a non-Tibetan artist convey all the many layers of meaning each image embodied, weighting each with appropriate caution, particularly in a system so profoundly encoded and schematically organized as Gelukpa Buddhism? More pressingly, was it possible to avoid the shock strange images invoke in uninitiated viewers, or

was this shock advantageous because it revealed just how dense things could be? In Chapter 2, the issue of transcultural and “translingual” practice in the Qing court serves as the starting point for an investigation of how the Buddhist images court artists produced were designed to yield meaning in several different registers, some of them transparent, others purposefully impenetrable.²⁹ Here the untranslatable presents itself as a kind of transformative black hole where quotes from alien visual systems, the juxtaposition of bits of images by hands trained in different idioms, add up to integrated compositions that speak in several different modes simultaneously, conveying a message controlled only by the sender.

Impenetrability and the refusal to yield meaning emerge as significant features of Qing Buddhist art, which was designed to represent insights both directly *and* esoterically. The very relationship between a representation and what it represents was repeatedly questioned and stretched in the Qing court in images embedded with visual puns or rebuses or in icons bearing inscribed mantras that represent both symbolically (transcribed sound standing for something else) and indexically (sound as trace), operating at the edge of language’s ability to convey meaning. Likewise, in portraiture, Qianlong in particular (but also his predecessors) took advantage of several distinctive visual modes to present themselves in startling, culturally distinct, Buddhist contexts—in some cases for private reasons that produced musings on the nature of representation; in others to serve conspicuously political, public ends. In all these efforts, the interplay between image and text, between image and name, between fragments of images, coalesces into pictures that, in their diagrammatic clarity, seem to offer an unmediated glimpse into some profound secret but simultaneously leave us firmly planted in a world of unyielding things.

The buildup of things in the Qing palace—serving as supports to practice as well as to the diplomatic interchange of gifts that accompanied reverence for great gurus and the tribute due a *cakravartin*—was, in Qianlong’s own words, “the result of one hundred years of peace.” In Chapters 3 and 4, we turn to the ways in which the Qing court learned to deal with an embarrassment of riches, both in the production of a well-organized, taxonomically sound method of storage and cataloging and in another kind of cataloging that rigorously brought to order the dizzying array of deities employed in Tibetan Buddhist practice. These two parallel efforts, brought together in Qianlong’s first attempt in 1744 to produce a comprehensive catalog of his Buddhist and Daoist collection (the *Bidian zhulin*, the Beaded Grove of the Secret Hall), were conspicuously dissociated in the much later supplement to the catalog produced in 1793. While the first catalog includes chapters on Chinese paintings and calligraphy (edited by leading Chinese scholars devoted to the latest empirical methods of evidential research), with chapters on non-Chinese materials (compiled by his guru, Rolpay Dorje), the supplement concentrates exclusively on Chinese art, including, however, the often polycultural products of the court itself. I use the word “art” very consciously, because the supplement also enhances the emphasis already placed in the first catalog on the treatment of religious images as works of art—that is, on the evaluation of them in material, aesthetic, and historical terms rather than simply their religious aspect. The organization of images used as supports in practice, most of them foreign at least in design, continued to be a major concern but now manifested itself in a separate realm of pantheon building.

Hans Belting, writing about a very different subject, the shift in the apprehension of religious imagery that occurred with the Protestant Reformation in Europe, has said that “the aesthetic sphere provided, so to speak, a kind of reconciliation between the lost way of experiencing images [as unmediated presence] and the one that remained [as work of art].” In this new world, with belief suspended, the power of icons was placed for reinterpretation into the hands of a new kind of master, the connoisseur, who, in Belting’s words, “[knew] the rules of the game.” Belting also argues that the Counter-Reformation Roman church challenged Reformation views of the earliest Christian tradi-

tion as imageless, resuscitating ancient pictures and sculptures as “relics of a bygone age,”³⁰ literal glimpses into the past. Thus on both sides of the European Reformation debate were theorists eager to historicize images that had once provided a direct, unmediated “presence” to the faithful.³¹ Qing efforts at image making and image collecting were also often focused on issues of authenticity and orthodoxy and on the precise historical positioning of objects that were simultaneously appreciated as windows into a different understanding of the material world and as physical traces of past experience, hovering somewhere between memory and history. The real power of images, past and present, was never a matter of doubt, however. There were simply too many ways to demonstrate their continued active presence.

In Chapter 5, the phenomenon of the “pious copy,” intended to faithfully reproduce charismatic, historic images and to provide corrective commentary on them, emerges as a means of constructing and manipulating the past, present, and future. Copying practice in the Qing court was complicated by several different expectations of the final product. At its simplest, a copy had to convey adequately the forms and colors of the original. But ancient paintings, however manipulated, were also traces of the past, remnants of authentic experience and action that, even in copying, still shone through. For the artist, the act of copying, whether line-by-line or as an act of broad emulation, was also a method of self-cultivation by means of which he could empathetically inhabit the past, retrieving it through reenactment as personal memory. These culturally embedded, Chinese expectations of the copy were also enmeshed in court practice with other, specifically Tibeto-Mongolian, Vajrayāna aims. From this alternative Inner Asian perspective, the act of copying might be more productively viewed as ritual performance, where transformations and corrections in the world of signs produce beneficial effects in the world of men. Thus in copies of such famous Buddhist paintings as Zhang Shengwen’s *Long Roll of Buddhist Images*, produced in the late twelfth century for the Yunnanese Dali court, the copies’ patron—Qianlong—could concern himself with multiple aspects of the original image: the fragmentation that beset the scroll in the fifteenth century and its various changes of format, the artist’s brush style and the hints it provided about the scroll’s provenance, the odd inclusion of unknown, local forms of otherwise well-known deities, and the presumptive insertion of the “usurper” kings of Dali at the head of the scroll. Once these issues were addressed and corrected in the copy (with the advice of Rolpay Dorje, a master iconographer), the original too was forever altered—if not materially, then certainly in significance.

The story of Zhang Shengwen’s *Long Roll* does not end with the copies made of it in Qianlong’s court. Like most images that claim to be “true,” this emphatically local painting, embedded in bits of lore and scenery particular to Dali, nonetheless also laid claim to universalism in its attempt to reproduce every form of every deity in the Buddhist repertoire. Zhang’s sources were clearly other works of art: everything from statues in Chinese, Indian, and Southeast Asian styles to frontispieces from sutras incorporated whole and without regard to apparent sequencing. His painting can thus be seen as a grand, collective meta-image rather than as a pantheon where stylistic eccentricities are erased and brought into conformity with a larger system. As Alexander Soper and particularly Wu Hung have shown in their work on famous images, these copies were not intended as icons to be worshiped but as auspicious signs of something akin to grace.³² In the Qianlong copy of Zhang’s scroll, all visual cues to the origin of each image in another, earlier image have been erased and the new scroll reveals itself as a different kind of sign—of a world brought into order. The latest irony of this politically charged act of copying, which was deeply implicated in Qing military ambitions in the southwest, has only emerged in the last few years: Recently the Qianlong copy, not Zhang’s original, has been reproduced as *The Buddha Scroll*, a charmingly miniaturized, affordable pantheon marketed to practicing Western Buddhists.³³

What remains of the original painting in *The Buddha Scroll*, where Zhang Shengwen is unmentioned, is still a potent, if altered, link to authentic experience for those who possess it. But what signs are there to mark this authenticity? How can true vision be recognized and represented? In Chapter 6, I approach this difficult, but central, question by posing the example of the visit to China in 1780 of the Sixth Panchen Lama, who, as a trusted ally of Qing concerns in Tibet, had by that time long been the object of Qianlong's interest. The Panchen's acceptance of the emperor's invitation, timed to correspond with Qianlong's seventieth birthday, set off a volley of reactions that are preserved in multiple series of representations in which the Panchen Lama was variously "recognized" in his fleshy reality, his charismatic position, and his unique, reincarnate inner landscape. More than five hundred communiqués and memorials detailing every aspect of his journey from Tibet and arrival at court; celebratory portraits of him and all his preincarnations; elaborate construction projects in Chengde and Beijing modeled on his home monastery, Tashilunpo; imperial poetry lauding him and recalling the banquets set for him; the emperor's final epitaph, written after he died of smallpox in Beijing a few months following his arrival—all reflect the court's effort to craft the event before, during, and after its unfolding. At the heart of this choreographed effort was Qianlong's sincere surprise as he encountered Tibet's most exalted lama and discovered him to be "familiar," his appearance not at all what might be expected from a *nirmanakāya*—a magically projected transformation body. The portraits done of him as he lay on his deathbed in Beijing give us the man with all his physical eccentricities, his everyday self, enthroned in a gemlike landscape of perfect order that reflects his "true likeness."

The conundrum any attempt at orthodox practice presents—religious or otherwise—ultimately forces the reconciliation of the actor and his actions with all of those who preceded him, in order to make the past present once again. Orthopraxis thus poses the individual will to uniqueness and the solitude of the single life against the greater need to realize a perfected, universalist scheme. In Buddhist practice, the resolution of this conflict between the embodied, transient life of the individual practitioner as it is actually lived and the transcendent emptiness he or she wishes to experience in enlightenment is a central goal that has repercussions both for the practitioners and for the world they inhabit. Thus Qianlong, in his momentary guise as the enlightened layman Vimalakīrti, practices what Robert Thurman has termed Vimalakīrti's incomparable, compassionate (if tough-minded) "liberative technique" both for his own sake and, as he surely believed, for the sake of the world in general. Vimalakīrti, Thurman writes, "makes it clear that the sole function of wisdom, gnosis, or any state of liberation is its function as a necessary complement to the indispensable great compassion that has no object. . . . Wisdom as a solitary possession, not integrated with liberative technique, is plainly declared to be bondage."³⁴ This insight, coupled with Vimalakīrti's head-on engagement with the material world of forms, makes his message, as Thurman points out, subtly tantric in its "reconciliation of extreme dichotomies": samsara and nirvana—but also the desire for enlightenment and the material benefits each ritual action brings to the world at large. In this view, shared by the emperors of the Qing dynasty, there is ultimately no contradiction between ritual and political action and none between the two apparently disparate goals of transcendence and political benefit.