Introduction

Chinese architectural paintings, or *jiehua* (a term explained in chapter 1) in general, are important visual documents for exploring the sensibilities and ideas of various individuals or groups of people toward material things in the external world. Unlike the natural subjects favored by Chinese painters to express cosmic principles or personal feelings, architecture is a constructed artifact appreciated for the beauty of its construction. As a complex form of human fabrication, architecture has a technological basis and requires accurate calculations and compliance with structural rules. As an essential component of material culture, architecture involves ownership or property right and is the emblem of power, status, and identity. Thus paintings of architecture acquire symbolic significance because they materialize cultural achievements as well as particular modes of experiencing. We are curious to inquire what symbolic and cultural values might have been attributed to this genre to suit the needs of successive historical periods.

Architectural painting has not attracted as much scholarly attention as it should. This type of work does not appeal to those who favor Chinese literati painting or prefer a more subtle approach to creativity. Because architectural painting entails meticulous description of physical appearances and was mostly practiced by professional painters, it is often regarded as an “inferior” art. Another reason for former neglect has to do with the assumption of pictorial fidelity to actual architecture, which means that technical analyses of building motifs may be required. To those without the knowledge of Chinese building technology, this subject may appear too difficult to approach. Architectural painting thus remains a subject to which minimal research has been devoted.

Recent studies have only partially redressed the situation. The surveys by Li Zhichao (1957), Maeda (1975), Ling (1982), Wang Yaoting (1984), You Xinmin (1989), and Fu Xinian (1998) largely focus on the history and the techniques of *jiehua*. The National Palace
Museum in Taipei has organized two special exhibitions on architectural paintings: Jiehua tezhan in 1986 and The Elegance and Elements of Chinese Architecture in 2000. All these studies and exhibitions have contributed to our knowledge of this subject, but we also begin to feel the obstacles attending the study of Chinese architectural painting. The paucity of surviving works by early major masters has posed problems in reconstructing a chronological history. We wonder if the existing scanty materials are original paintings by early famous masters or simply works attributed to them. In this regard, the studies by William Trousdale and by Wang Teh-yu have reminded us of the danger of reconstructing jiehua history with attributed works. Moreover, we also feel the need to further investigate those concepts associated with architectural representation or to learn about the social functions and cultural implications of this unique painting genre, which is so much oriented toward rationality in Chinese aesthetics. Most of the studies have largely dealt with the historical development and stylistic diversity of architectural painting, emphasizing in particular the pictorial representation of architectural space. A systematic framework for an integrated history of jiehua that involves concepts, themes, styles, meanings, and patronage is yet to be established.

It is also worth mentioning that our present limited knowledge of Chinese architectural painting is often affected by the perception (and sometimes the prejudice) of the literati who were the authors of art theories and art criticisms in traditional China. Many writings of the literati, at least as early as the eleventh century, regard the scholar-painter Guo Zhongshu (d. 977) as the greatest exponent of the genre and therefore hold Song dynasty (960–1279) architectural paintings in high esteem. An enormous admiration for the great Song tradition has unfortunately put the works of the later periods in the shade. With very limited surviving paintings to verify such claims, however, Guo Zhongshu’s paintings and indeed the overall Song achievements in this field will never be fully known and are likely to continue to be mythologized. Then why should we focus only on the Song tradition and neglect the richness of existing later materials? Why should we perpetuate a biased view held by the high elite and neglect other works done by professional painters?

Any attempt to assess a work of art must be historically and culturally contingent, especially when concepts of aesthetic value could be very much shaped by traditions, race- or class-consciousness, the politics of tastes, or even subjective judgments. The failure of art historians to view architectural painting as something more than an aesthetic and technical phenomenon or to place it within the other modes of social activity has led to their prejudice against this type of painting. But the meanings of works of art lie in the particular contexts in which they are experienced and interpreted.

This book has no ambition to be an exhaustive history of Chinese architectural painting, and its scope is limited to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). It aims to highlight the cultural significance of Qing architectural images by incorporating them into patterns of life experienced by individuals or groups and by examining themes and styles that spoke to the
needs of contemporary society. This, I believe, will give a new way of thinking about Chinese architectural painting. I chose to study the Qing dynasty because this period witnessed an impressive resurgence of the genre—an artistic phenomenon that is sufficiently strong to sustain scholarly interest and inquiry—and because this period has left behind a massive amount of reliable materials for research. Unlike other existing works on Qing architectural paintings—for example, the studies by Nie Chongzheng and by Yang Yongyuan—this book is concerned not only with art-historical studies of artists and styles but also with cultural interpretations that devote attention to patronage, symbolic content, functions, and meanings of art.

Of all the Qing jiehua, only those produced within the time frame of the Kangxi (1662–1722), Yongzheng (1723–1735), and Qianlong (1736–1795) periods will be included. This era of more than a hundred years was the golden age of jiehua production under the Qing. The architectural images under examination are taken not only from architectural painting but also from works of other subject categories, such as narrative, genre, and topographical paintings. My selection is contingent on the symbolic content and the stylistic features of the architectural elements in a given work. As far as region is concerned, I focus mainly on the production within the court in Beijing and outside the court in Yangzhou, so that the discussion will note some parallels and contrasts between imperial and private patronage. Because of space considerations, Yangzhou has been chosen as a case study to represent jiehua production outside the court. Its choice is appropriate, for under mercantile patronage, Yangzhou's art scene was vibrant and prosperous enough to rival that of the capital. Like Beijing, Yangzhou had immense financial resources to draw painters from other cities and provinces. The traffic of painters between regions encourages us to view the two art centers of Beijing and Yangzhou as part of a larger network for cultural diffusion on a national level. Readers may notice some limitations, as there is still insufficient space here to present a comprehensive picture of the overall Qing attainments in the field of jiehua, which pertained to both elite and mass cultures across the country. While comprehensiveness is not feasible, the studies here form the starting point for a better understanding of the genre.

Painting, Architecture, and Culture

My interest in this topic began with a concern with the methodology adopted in some of the studies of Chinese architectural history and architectural representation. Since Chinese architectural paintings are said to give faithful historical representations of actual buildings, some architectural historians, out of an initial interest in the builder’s art, have also devoted attention to pictorial images and used them as visual evidence to help reconstruct architectural history. To some degree, pictorial representations supply clues as to the types, general appearances, and layouts of architecture. But any uncritical reliance on pictorial images as “accurate” illustrations of actual constructions is a matter of method-
ological concern. Just as architectural historians employ pictorial images to reconstruct past buildings, art historians examine features of architectural motifs to seek for evidence that helps in the dating and authentication of ancient paintings. But they also recognize that dating paintings by dating buildings painted in them may not be conclusive. As Trousdale observed, “Architectural analysis . . . cannot be called upon to supersede critical judgment and aesthetic sense, for little enough is known about early building, and contemporary descriptive texts often pose difficult problems in technical interpretation.”

Although the close relation between architectural painting and building is indisputable, it is equally important to note that painters were dealing with the construction of pictorial images, not the construction of actual buildings. Painters tended to adhere to pictorial conventions or past models in their artistic approach. They might modify earlier prototypes in accordance with current architectural practices, but whether they faithfully and accurately depicted actual buildings in paintings remains questionable. And whatever the actual capacity to achieve a so-called accurate representation at a particular historical time, the painter’s perception of architecture—which was produced under specific historical and cultural circumstances—was neither universal nor timeless. The way painters experienced the material world, the modes of architectural thinking articulated through paintings, the symbolic meanings of architectural paintings—all these underwent changes over time. Thus we cannot assume that the relations between painting and building remain historically constant.

Perhaps what is more important is to distinguish between painting and architecture without necessarily assuming that architectural painting is an instrument for reflecting prevailing building styles. Painting and architecture are two different aesthetic products, and each plays a role in displaying various kinds of conventions, virtuosity, and symbolic values, which may coincide or diverge. To fully understand their relation, we need to widen the scope of interdisciplinary studies by examining both of them in the wider sphere of culture.

The definition of culture in this book is based on the dynamic approach now adopted in social anthropology. Past studies of culture often mistakenly assumed that it is a set of defined characteristics shared timelessly by a population of homogeneous individuals. Recent anthropological analyses have pointed to the complexity of cultural change and the diversity of views and beliefs held by different members of society. This new approach attempts to get away from past assumptions and is concerned with how different individuals and groups participate in various cultural discourses about the contents or meanings of their lives. Because these meanings undergo transformations in response to political, social, and economic changes, culture (taken in its anthropological sense) is defined as an ongoing process of the construction of human meanings. This process involves many recognizable key symbols within culturally identifiable parameters. While different groups may share some of these symbolic reference points in their discourses about culture, they may not share others. It is through this never ending process of debating and selecting the relevant symbols that peoples who are differently positioned in social relations construct
their particular way of life. The participation of political, social, or economic institutions in this process also means that culture can be easily used as a tool for claiming legitimacy for their discourses and can become a political, social, or economic strategy.

How does painting, or art in general, fit into this definition of culture? The most common use of the word “culture” to refer to art, architecture, music, and literature is indeed based on the idea that culture “describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development.” Since art manifests itself in the form of objects, there has been a tendency to fetishize these objects as “high” art (culture), thereby obscuring the actual social and cultural process that brought the art object into being. Such fetishization also obscures the on-going cultural processes that continue to validate, or recognize, these manifestations as art. It is these processes to which Clifford Geertz draws our attention when he speaks of “art as a cultural system.”

If we regard painting and architecture as two separate symbolic forms in the general sphere of culture, both will become primary documents that seek various places in an active process of meaning making. They will become constructions of various kinds, making use of pictorial images or tangible forms to express culturally framed sensibilities. The relationship between architecture and architectural representation lies not in pictorial fidelity to building construction but in the similar function of each as a cultural system. Only by abandoning the assumption that architectural painting depicts the objective world may we fully realize its incorporation of symbolic dimensions. We are therefore concerned with how Qing architectural representations tell us about the process of meaning construction through architectural images, actual and imaginary alike.

The images of Chinese architecture display well-defined boundaries of space and intricate links between parts and components, thereby making them a potent form for expressing the cultural dialogue on “order” in a Confucian framework. This conception of order was shared by most individuals or groups within Chinese society and was central to many Chinese cultural debates. It is therefore not surprising that the quest for political and social order under the Qing emperors, especially the establishment of a new “world order” under Qianlong’s “universalism,” was expressed visually through architectural representation. Courtly images of architecture also appealed to some outside the imperial realm because the images represented an aspect of material culture favored by those who led or desired to lead an extravagant life. The images were relevant to those who were concerned with cultural differentiation as a means to assert status within a hierarchical society and were particularly meaningful to those who were socially mobile, such as officials, merchants, and nouveaux riches. By contrast, the Confucian scholars who disdained flamboyance would prefer simple thatched huts. Thus, my cultural analysis of Qing architectural images aims to trace the anticipated participants in their cultural discourses, to understand their choice of symbols, to find out which symbols were taken from the past or borrowed from elsewhere in the process of constructing meaning.
When the Qing art critic Wang Gai (active ca. 1677–1705) reasserted the value of *jiehua* in the *Jieziyuan huazhuan*, he remarked that *jiehua* provided the “rules” and was the “jade precept” for mastery of brushwork. He expounded,

Some who believe themselves independent claim that they follow no rules. Actually, the stage at which one is most free in brushwork is the time when, in attempting to surpass the ancients, one is most keenly aware of their presence and methods. . . .

It may be observed that the ancients worked without rules only because they first paid careful attention to technique. One cannot work daringly without taking great pains. Drawing by *jiehua* cannot be put down as work only of artisans. The method should be examined and studied. Its practice is similar to the disciplines of Chan Buddhism. Those who study Buddhism must begin first with its disciplines, so that for the rest of their lives they will not stray or be involved with evil influences. *Jiehua* is the jade precept for a painter and the first step for a beginner.¹²

Interestingly, this passage is also a statement on the pattern of artistic change, as highlighted in the lines “the stage at which one is most free in brushwork is the time when, in attempting to surpass the ancients, one is most keenly aware of their presence and methods.” According to Wang Gai, *jiehua* provided the technique and the method upon which innovations were based. This artistic evolution—which is marked by the dualistic relationship between continuity and change—can also be applied to the wider sphere of culture.

As culture frames the way *jiehua* painters employed the appropriate skills to translate their perceptions of man-made objects into artistic expressions, the studies here are concerned with conventions and types, as well as with stylistic transformations that served to articulate contemporary views. The pictorial conventions to be studied include the linear treatment of architectural forms, the grouping of buildings to articulate a space-time conception, and the placement of architecture in a natural environment. I will also examine how different kinds of cultural institutions were active in forming the sensibility of a particular period. Among the artistic factors, the weight of the past in creative endeavors, the transmission of styles from teachers to disciples, the innovative impulses of painters, the prevailing art theories and styles, the constraints imposed by different patronage systems, and the importation of European representational techniques are some essential aspects to be considered. And because other cultural practices such as religious beliefs and philosophical systems are integral parts of the Chinese present, their interaction with painting is also an important issue in my cultural analysis of Qing architectural representation.

In the first chapter, I seek to define *jiehua* and propose a number of concepts and conventions that had been related to architectural representation since the Song dynasty. The development of the genre during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) will be analyzed with careful consideration of how the Ming circumstances had provided the prior conditions for the impressive upsurge of *jiehua* in the subsequent Qing period. The second chapter discusses patrons and painters of *jiehua* during the Qing. It also lays out the framework within which detailed thematic studies of Qing architectural images in the later chapters can be fitted.
The paintings commissioned by the Qing emperors will be examined in the third and fourth chapters, and those produced for private patrons at the art center of Yangzhou will be studied in the fifth and sixth chapters. Categorizing the pictorial data thematically will help to facilitate comparative studies of the works produced under different patronage systems, and my discussion follows this order of sequence: contemporary, historical, and mythical themes. The styles, symbolism, functions, and meanings of works from each thematic category will be examined within particular cultural contexts. The concluding chapter summarizes the results of the studies and evaluates the achievements made in architectural painting during the Qing.

The chapter structures adopted here may appear artificially neat and too simplistic in comparison to the extensive picture in reality, which was marked by diverse complexity or a lack of cohesion. But readers should be reminded that this book, with its particular framework, is largely directed to making sense of selected works through an investigation of their meanings for the anticipated audiences within specific contexts. In the discussion of style, this book reveals an ethos of the Qing period expressed through architectural representation. It identifies the period’s style as well as various representations in Beijing and Yangzhou. Although certain issues have yet to be investigated—such as individual painters’ styles, the specific roles of each artist in renewing the jiehua tradition, and the development of the genre in other urban areas—this study provides a wider framework for further investigation, verification, and modification. The stylistic accomplishments of individual painters are explicable only if we accept the collective advances made in the genre, only if we are sure of the goals they sought in a wider cultural context.