

Imperial illusions: a cross-cultural architectural comparison of qing court tongjing paintings and western trompe-l'œil quadraturism

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Abstract: During the 18th century, missionary painters centered around Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining) created the unique art form of Tongjing Hua within the Qianlong court during the Qing dynasty. To understand the correlation between 17th-century Baroque perspective and how it was influenced by and was parallel to 18th-century Qing court art, one must look at Castiglione's origins as an Italian Jesuit. Castiglione was trained at the height of the Italian Baroque, and his art therefore reflected and was a product of European Baroque illusionism.¹ His arrival in China was after two years at sea, and because he left Italy during the peak of the late Baroque (early 18th century), he served as a time capsule of that era, taking principles of the Italian Baroque into a new context, where his teachings achieved the longevity even as Europe advanced to Rococo.²

Former research is largely centered around the perspectives of the transmission of Western painting techniques moving east or the fusion of the Chinese and Western styles. This paper puts forward that the interrelatedness between tongjing hua and European Baroque perspective/illusionistic art extends beyond just style and technique; instead, the extension constitutes two significant "spatial construction practices" (as theorized by Henri Lefebvre)³ that showcase how architectural illusion serves different socio-political wills. In this paper, the focus point will be centered around Jingshengzhai, an epitomized wall painting of the Qing court, and Juanqinzhai, an existing dreamlike exemplar wall painting hidden in the folds of the Qianlong Garden. Although Castiglione passed away before the completion of Juanqinzhai, the work was a result of his students, thereby continuing the legacy of scientific perspective he introduced. Parallel to these two works, this paper will also draw a comparison to the 17th-century ceiling frescoes by Andrea Pozzo, whose artwork reflected the standard training Castiglione received. Furthermore, we argue that the Western Trompe-l'œil Quadratura aimed to restrain and conquer the architectural structure as well as the point of view of the onlookers through pictorial illusion by binding them to a single vanishing point. Through this constraint, the artists of that period aimed to manifest the transcending of divine power over space. On the other hand, Tongjing Huas in the Qing court interconnect architectural space with regard toward the viewers' focal points, painting artworks that are navigable where the viewers can see the tongjing huas from multiple angles and locations to reflect the Qianlong Emperor's personalized physical and mental fantasy and the micro-representation of imperial ideals. This paper explains how the shared scientific tool between Tongjing Paintings and Trompe-l'œil quadratura Art—linear perspective—contributed to the advancement of two branches of architectural acts. Driven by differing philosophical ideals (Chinese philosophy of ambience versus Plato's theory of Form) and power structures (private servitude and public enlightening), the Western and Eastern wall paintings open to a more nuanced analysis of the connection between space, body, and power within cross-cultural art.

Keywords: Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining), Andrea Pozzo, Tongjing Hua, Quadraturism, Linear Perspective, Spatial Construction.

1. Introduction

Ever since research around the tongjing huas came into view, the focal points of research have been centered around the “East-West synthesis” characteristic. Former research points were mostly based on two branches: one is the European perspective and chiaroscuro techniques introduced to the Qing court by Jesuit painters led by Giuseppe Castiglione; the other branch is analyzing the symbolic meaning and cultural fusion of the artistic elements of the tongjing hua. These studies have established a solid foundation, yet by placing tongjing huas in the passive interpretation of “reception-transformation,” research may be leaving out its core value as a more holistic spatial experience.

Both Andrea Pozzo’s ceiling fresco and Juanqinzhai’s tongjing hua are a crucial part of their respective architectures that bring the space they inhabit alive with thought and history. Therefore, this paper would like to consider tongjing hua and Western illusionistic art as forms of “architectural action,” meaning this paper’s focal point will be on “how they build” rather than “how they depict.” This paper’s goal is to demonstrate that the process in “architectural action” showcases and reveals fundamental cultural differences between Eastern and Western territories in the 17th-18th centuries in regard to spatial concepts and how they reflect bodily experiences and expressions/symbolism of power. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvres concepts on production of space, this paper separates the representations found in Jesuit baroque art, which imposes geometric order, ⁴ and the representations of the Qing court, which focuses on immersive experience of the emperor. ⁵

2. A Shared tool, divergent visions: perspective as cultural construction

Linear perspective provided the technical foundation for both Baroque ceiling paintings and Qing Court tongjing hua. However, these two styles extended themselves through intellectual and cultural framing that led the outcome to different results. Perspective was a result of Renaissance humanism and the scientific revolution. Pozzo states in his treatise *Rules and Examples of Perspective* that mastering perspective was synonymous with manifesting a spiritual connection. ⁶ in other words, perspective was a way to visually identify the perfection of heaven geometrically on the vaults of a church where science and religion interconnect to give the viewer a secular scene of ultimate power.

In the Qianlong court, this imported science of perspective underwent a change of cultural translation under the Qing dynasty traditions and cultures. Artists, who were largely used by the court, were less interested in its spiritual or theological foundations than in its practical utility for creating lifelike effects. Archives often label these works that use perspective techniques as xianfa hua (线法画, “line-method painting”).⁷ This coinage labeled perspective as a technique to achieve detailed perfection rather than a philosophical or religious perfection. Artists like Castiglione adapted the method of xianfa hua by softening the prominent and harsh chiaroscuro (often criticized as creating unflattering “yin-yang faces”) to better merge with Chinese aesthetic preferences⁸ for a more neutral facial color palette, as shadows were not a welcoming visual in Qing court art. This translation and transmission of linear perspective showcase how cultural and geological differences can lead to vastly different styles under the foundation of linear perspective, where this tool was used for theological perfection in the west and for aesthetic perfection in the Qing court.



Figure 1 Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining), Swallows and Peach Blossom, mid-18th century, ink and colors on silk, Taipei Palace Museum (originally painted for the Qing Court in Beijing).

3. Spatial conquest vs. spatial weaving: two architectural wills

The difference in understanding of perspective forms the architectural style into two different models, where the West focused on spatial conquest whilst the East focused on spatial weaving. In Pozzo's Sant' Ignazio ceiling, the painting showcases spatial conquest. On a flat barrel vault, Pozzo paints the illusion of a multi-tiered dome open to the sky where it rises to heaven⁹. The real architecture is visually negated and replaced by an illusion that portrays the superiority of the spiritual power over the materialistic confinement of the architecture of the church. This conquest could therefore be shown in a Platonic hierarchy where the ideal (the painted heaven) overshadows the real (the stone vault), thereby almost ignoring the building and using perspective as a way to reach secular power.

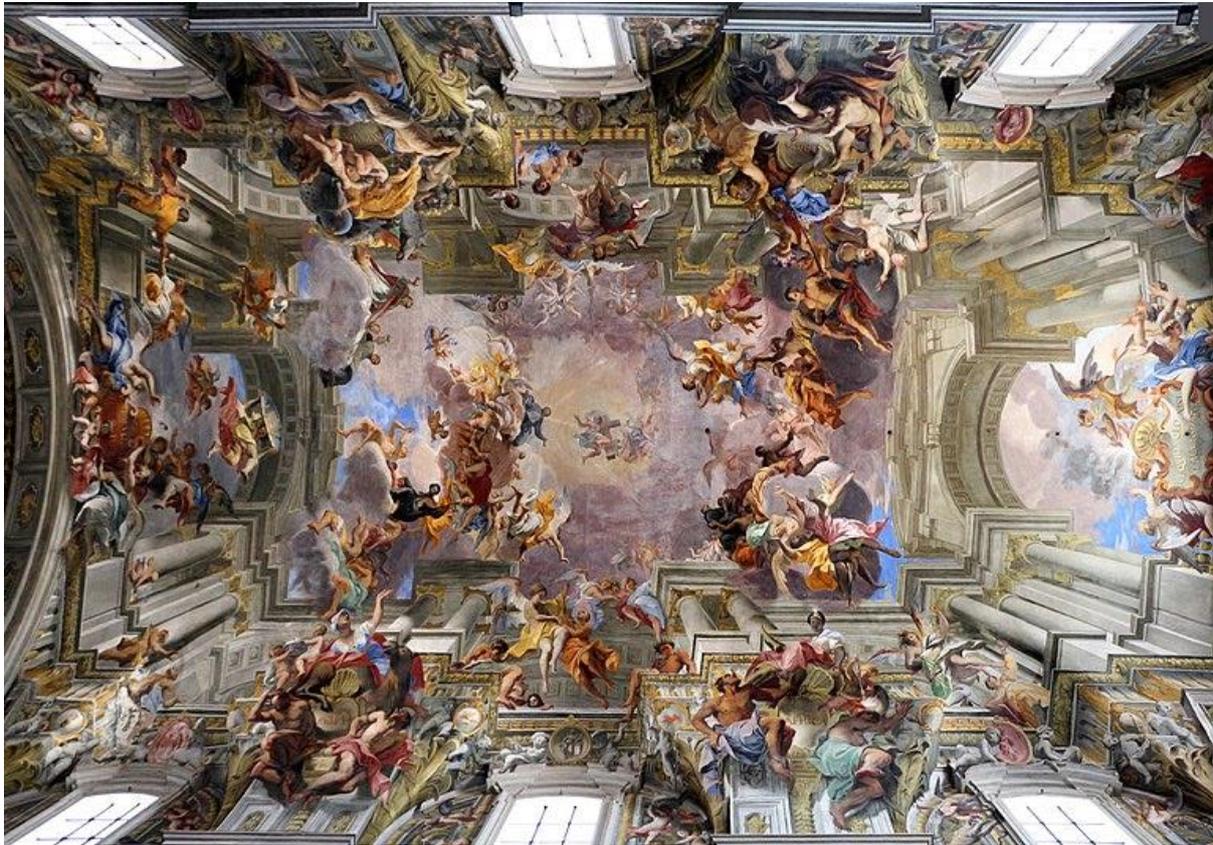


Figure 2 Andrea Pozzo, *Gloria di Sant'Ignazio*, 1685–1694, ceiling fresco, Church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome.

The *tongjing hua* of *Juanqinzhai* operates on a completely different principle of spatial weaving. The painting does not ignore the architectural designer but rather extends on the basis of the architecture and embellishes it. Real architectural elements such as a small theater stage and carved bamboo railings are molded with paintings that extend the narrative¹⁰ where one can see wisteria trellises and distant courtyards that add to the overall architectural space rather than ignoring it. The effect of this *tongjing hua* is not of a ceiling torn open, but rather of walls gently dissolving and placing the viewer within an idealized, enclosed garden. This practice stems from the classical Chinese aesthetic tradition of *zao jing* (造境), which is the “construction of an ambience.”¹¹ Space is not a container to be dominated or conquered but an extension to be cultivated through artistic elements like *jie jing* (borrowed scenery) and the molding of solid and void. The result is a woven spatial space designed for an immersive experience rather than for admiring from a distance.



Figure 3 Workshop of Giuseppe Castiglione, Interior of Juanqinzhai, c. 1770s, tongjing hua on silk and bamboo marquetry, The Forbidden City, Beijing.

4. The Body in Space: Discipline and the Imperial Stroll

These contrasting spatial strategies of conquest and weaving directly influence the viewer's bodily experience by showcasing distinct and different forms of power within the act of looking. Baroque illusionism focuses on bodily discipline where Pozzo's illusion only works perfectly from a punto stabile (fixed point) on the church floor which is a "holy point" that dictates where the viewers must stand.¹² This enforced viewpoint forces the onlookers to stand under one point where the viewpoint submission mirrors a submission to the centralized divine authority prominent in the 17th century where the body is fixed to receive a singular view marked by divine authority.



Figure 4 Andrea Pozzo, Trompe l'Oeil Fake Dome, 1685, oil on canvas, Church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome.

In contrast, the *tongjing hua* of the Qianlong Garden was designed for the emperor's active continuous viewpoint. However, it is important to note that Juanqinzhai uses a mixture of two systems. At the seat of the emperor, there is one scientifically perfect viewpoint that uses the Western perspective method. However, unlike Pozzo's illusion, the painting does not "break" when one moves away from the specific point. Instead, the *tongjing hua* utilizes the "scattered perspective" (散点透视), where even if the emperor moves out of that point, the scenery depicted in the painting will still be natural and beautiful.¹³ The emperor was not a static worshipper disciplined by a single point due to divine power, but rather a person immersed in the architectural scene who could enjoy the art while walking. The illusions in Juanqinzhai or Fuwangge transform through movement as each angle brings a different perspective into the scene, thereby enforcing the garden principle of *bu yi jing yi* (步移景异, "the view shifts with every step"). Power here is shown through the emperor's ultimate power of the "perfect" single point at where he sits and is also expressed through a freedom to navigate and control the view as he walks. His moving body activates the space, connecting its various illusions through his eyes. The art becomes an immersive experience of imperial leisure and a place for self-contemplation.

5. Case Synthesis: Jingshengzhai and Juanqinzhai as Spatial Biography

"Architectural action" in Jingshengzhai and Juanqinzhai served the Qianlong Emperor's evolving self-contemplation, creating stages in a spatial autobiography. Jingshengzhai, which was built during the height of the High Qing era, functioned as visual evidence of imperial luxury and power. Although Jingshengzhai was lost to fire, archival descriptions suggest that its *tongjing hua* were a showcase of beauty where the artistic immersion was likely designed to instantly overwhelm select visitors with a display of the empire's wealth. It was a statement of power, and its purpose was set for semi-public admiration.

Juanqinzhai, made for the Emperor Qianlong as a retirement retreat, served an inward-facing personal purpose for admiration and self-contemplation. Its immersive scenes that extend from the architecture show wisteria and courtyards that extend out from the walls. This immersion is integrated with crafts like bamboo carving and jade inlay, creating a personal mini heaven for reflection and admiration. The *tongjing hua* projected an experience derived from the emperor's refined taste in art and reflected his wish for tranquil longevity. Together, these *tongjing huas* illustrate how they were not a uniform style but a flexible art

technique for crafting a space where one could showcase both the public glory of the state's prosperity and the private reflection of the emperor.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study shows that the encounter and correlation between European illusionism and Qing court art was far more complex and significant than an exchange of techniques. While both traditions utilized the science of linear perspective, they channeled it into fundamentally different architectural exhibitions: a Western style of divine-right conquest and a Qing style of imperial-right weaving.

Another conclusion that could be drawn is that in early modern cross-cultural exchange, technologies could travel faster than the ideologies that originally shaped them. The Qianlong court did not merely adopt Western perspective along with Western ideologies, but rather their own sovereignty and culture repurposed it, stripping perspective of its transcendental ideals and redirecting it toward the Chinese artistic pursuit of *zao jing*¹¹, which was the creation of a perfected atmosphere. *Tongjing hua*, therefore, stands not as evidence of cultural exchange but rather as how a globalized technique was repurposed to serve a pre-existing philosophy of space. This space was ultimately designed to weave space and mind into the basis of architecture. The concept of spatial construction and immersion of self in viewpoint offers a more nuanced angle for understanding the intercorrelation of art with power and cultural identity in different parts of the world.

7. Footnotes

¹ Marco Musillo, *The Shining Inheritance: Italian Painters at the Qing Court, 1699–1812* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 17-45.

² Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 21-60.

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 38.

⁵ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39.

⁶ Andrea Pozzo, *Rules and Examples of Perspective Proper for Painters and Architects*, trans. John James (London: Benj. Motte, 1707), Vol. 1, Preface.

⁷ Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 72.

⁸ Marco Musillo, *The Shining Inheritance: Italian Painters at the Qing Court, 1699–1812* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016), 118.

⁹ Andrea Pozzo, *Rules and Examples of Perspective Proper for Painters and Architects*, trans. John James (London: Benj. Motte, 1707), Vol. 2, Plate 52.

¹⁰ Nancy Berliner, ed., *The Emperor's Private Paradise: Treasures from the Forbidden City* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2010), 110.

¹¹ Hui Zou, *A Jesuit Garden in Beijing and Early Modern Chinese Culture* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), 87.

¹² Andrea Pozzo, *Rules and Examples of Perspective Proper for Painters and Architects*, trans. John James (London: Benj. Motte, 1707), Vol. 1, Plate 24.

¹³ Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), 190-199.

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9. Figure list

Fig 1. Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining), *Swallows and Peach Blossom*. Mid-18th Century. Ink and colors on silk. Image Courtesy of: Taipei Palace Museum. This work shows the adaptation of Western shading for the Qing imperial aesthetic to avoid harsh "yin-yang faces".

Fig 2. Andrea Pozzo, *Gloria di Sant'Ignazio*. 1685–1694. Ceiling fresco. Location: Church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome. Image Courtesy of: Wilfredo Rafael Rodríguez Hernández / Wikimedia Commons. This fresco shows "spatial conquest" by using mathematical perspective to create a fixed point.

Fig 3. Court Painters in the style of Giuseppe Castiglione, *Interior of Juanqinzhai (Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service)*. c. 1770s. Location: Forbidden City, Beijing. Image Courtesy of: The World Monuments Fund (WMF) and The Palace Museum, Beijing. This interior shows "spatial weaving," integrating the outdoors into the theater's structure.

Fig 4. Andrea Pozzo, *Trompe l'Oeil Fake Dome*. 1685. Oil on canvas. Location: Church of Sant'Ignazio, Rome. Image Courtesy of: Jean-Christophe BENOIST / Wikimedia Commons. This work shows the "vanishing point" illusion where a flat canvas appears as a 3D dome.