The Story Behind a Wooden Shrine of Palatial Construction

OI LING CHIANG

THE IMPERIAL Summer Villa (避暑山莊) in Chengde suffered several major lootings from 1900 to 1933: as a result of the invasion by the Eight-Nation Alliance and the Russian conflict with Japan in northern China respectively, and the Japanese invasion in the 1930s. Aggravating these losses was the reported ransacking in 1933 by Tang Yu-Ling (湯玉麟), an unscrupulous warlord, who stole many items from the Summer Villa and put them up for sale.

One of the artefacts taken from the villa during this tumultuous period was a small shrine made of *zitan* wood, which was fortunately passed down to those who recognised its cultural value, and safeguarded it accordingly. It has now found a permanent abode in the Liang Yi Museum where it can once again be appreciated by a broader audience.

Created during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795), this shrine is an unique synthesis of different influences—architectural, cultural, religious and philosophical—that have impacted China, and stands as a testimony to the country's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity. For these reasons, this shrine deserves in-depth study. This article will thus begin with a review of the historical context of the shrine, and proceed to explore the significance of its architectural components.

This shrine of palatial construction was built to house the icon of Manjusri (文殊菩薩). It was constructed in the exact image of a palatial building, but of reduced scale. At first glance, the most striking feature of the shrine is its perfect proportion. Christopher Cooke, a British expert in Chinese *zitan* and *huanghuali* furniture, immediately noted this aspect of the shrine, measured it, and confirmed that it was built using the "golden ratio",[1] given the proportions of its *Shang*, *Zhong* and *Xia* sections. Perhaps it is the conformity to the "golden ratio" that gives the shrine its aesthetic charm. However, the finesse in detail and craftsmanship is what endows the shrine with an elegance transcendent of time and culture. In order to appreciate its true value and historical significance, it is important to understand what the shrine is, and why and how it was made.

Close Ties Between the Qing Court and Tibet

There is considerable documentary and cultural evidence showing Chinese influence in Tibetan affairs from the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) onwards, but it was not until the Qianlong reign when aristocratic internal power struggles led to the self-governing structure in Tibet being readjusted. The Qing (1644–1911) court restructured the system of government with the introduction of a three-fold management system, stipulated in the 13-article Imperial Ordinance in 1751 and the 29-article Imperial Ordinance in 1793. The stipulations of these ordinances included: first, making the 7th Dalai Lama the head of religious and administrative affairs; second, strengthening the position of the Qing High Commissioners; and third, setting up a local (*Gaxag*) government to handle government affairs and making them report directly to the Dalai Lama and the High Commissioners. The local government consisted of four *Galoon* officials, including one monk and three laymen, each appointed by the Qing court.

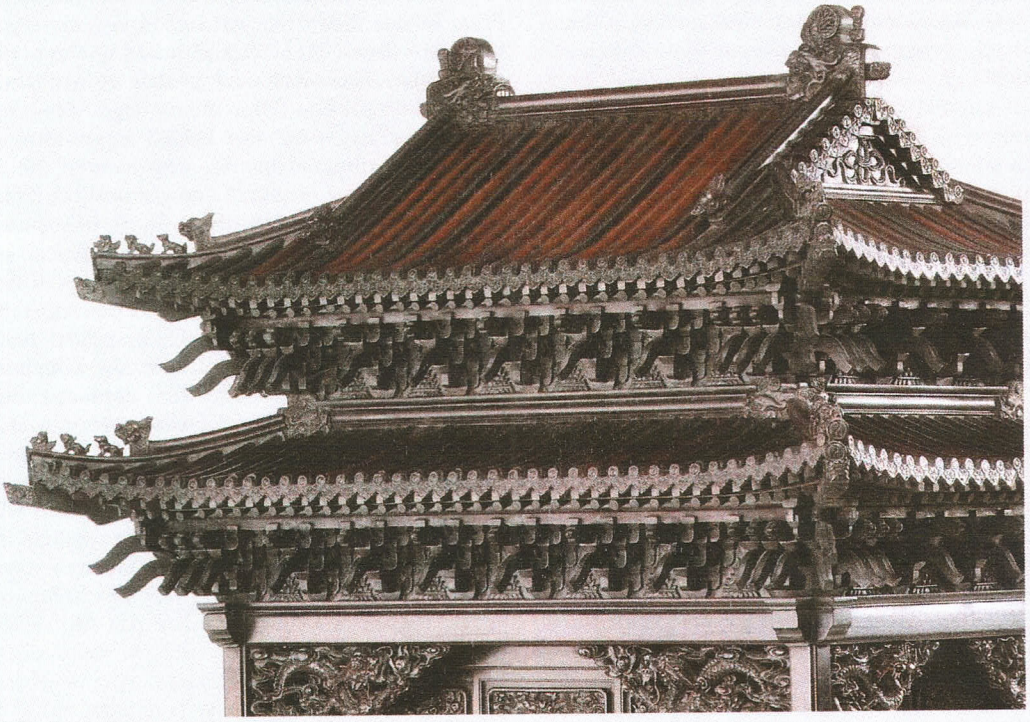
When the young Emperor Qianlong came to power in 1735, he appointed Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje (章嘉胡土克圖 or Zhangjiahutuketu) (1717–1786) as his adviser for affairs related to ethnic minorities—in particular in Tibet and Mongolia. Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje, a follower of the Yellow Hat Sect of Tantric Buddhism, was also given the title of Chief Administrative Lama, and acted as Emperor Qianlong's personal spiritual teacher and advisor on matters related to Buddhist art, literature and religious practices. In this regard he was well suited, having been born in the northwest of Tibet and raised at the imperial court. A polyglot, he contributed greatly to the translating of Buddhist scripts into different languages. More importantly, his translation efforts also helped in training a group of talented multilingual monks, who assisted the emperor to resolve a number of ethnic and cultural conflicts.

Placing Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje in such a senior position demonstrated Qianlong's keen political sense; internally this appointment also impacted on artistic traditions in China. Both Qianong's grandfather, Kangxi (1662–1722), and father, Yongzheng (1723–1735), prided themselves on being truly Sinicised, especially in the dimensions of art, literature and culture. The art produced during their reigns spoke of subtlety and purity in form and colour—in the manner of a Confucian scholar gentleman. However, during the reign of Qianlong this language of artistic simplicity and purity changed to a dynamic and compact one infused with multi-cultural images and symbols. The shrine, made in 1769 (the 34th year of Qianlong's reign), typifies Tibetan Buddhist cultural and religious influence.

The impact of Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje begins with

[1] The golden ratio—in mathematics, two quantities possess the "golden ratio" if their ratio is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantities.

Zitan wooden shrine from the Imperial Summer Villa in Chengde, made in 1769 (the 34th year of Qianlong's reign). Height 109 cm, width 72 cm, depth 55 cm. Provenance: Mr Guan Zu Zhang



Close-up of the decorations of the double-eave roof, the carved wooden figures representing different types of mythical animals that were used to guard important imperial palatial buildings

him being given the former residence of Emperor Yongzheng to be used as his head office. The transformation of this former imperial residence into a religious landmark in the capital naturally had an impact on Chinese aesthetics at all levels of society in China. The project of creating a headquarters for Tantric Buddhism within the capital was representative of the Qing court's attention to Buddhism. The Qing court, especially during the reign of Qianlong, directed huge resources into building Tibetan monasteries and associated icons and iconographies in the Forbidden City, as well as in other imperial compounds such as the Summer Villa in Chengde, where this and several other imperial shrines have been found.

It is a long-standing Chinese tradition to house icons within a shrine, and many different sizes and types of shrines were therefore needed to house all the Buddhist icons given to members of the imperial family for worship. On the back of the palatial shrine is an inscription (in Chinese, Manchurian, Mongolian and Tibetan) that points to its imperial origins:

乾隆三十四年三月初二月欽命章嘉胡土克圖認看供奉利益新造文殊菩薩番稱嘉穆揚清肯和隆鄂拂薩稱訥蘇蒙古稱曼珠施哩

By imperial order, on the second day of March in the 34th year of Qianlong, Zhangjiahutuketu (Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje) *was asked to verify the newly made Liyi Manjusri icon and invoke the offering ceremony for the icon, generally referred to as the Jiamuyangqinghahelong, in gefusa as the Nasu, in Mongolian as the Mansusili.* (Translated by Oi Ling Chiang)

One reason for the large number of Tibetan style Buddhist icons at the Summer Villa in Chengde was because Qing emperors received the Chiefs of the Eight Banners (the Manchurian administrative divisions) there; it was also where the annual Autumn Hunting Ceremony took place. The religious icons, shrines and temples were therefore needed for both ceremonial and private worship by the visiting chiefs as well as by members of the imperial family.

The archives known as "Records of The Imperial Workshop" (造辦處活計檔) show that Emperor Qianlong was personally involved in the design and selection of materials for important shrines. Unfortunately, the specific entry for the commission of the shrine under discussion cannot be found, as some court records were destroyed or lost. Other entries, however, reveal the condition under which such shrines were made. For example, three *zitan* wood Buddhist shrines of palatial style were made in the 49th year of Qianlong (1784). The Records of The Imperial Workshop show that shrines were made in strict accordance with instructions given directly by the emperor, with a clause stating that personnel involved would be severely punished should any shrine fail to pass the emperor's personal inspection. The severe conditions associated with the production of shrines show not only their religious significance, but also Qianlong's meticulousness in ensuring that every detail was properly executed; this reflected his respect for the diverse cultures in his empire. Undoubtedly, Qianlong's personal involvement in the manufacturing of Buddhist shrines and icons directly contributed to the growth of Tantric Buddhism in China, as well as the development of this art style during his reign.

Classification of Buddhist Shrines

From the Records of The Imperial Workshop we also learn of the different styles of Buddhist shrine created during the Qing dynasty. As Buddhist shrines were exact replicas of actual buildings, the names of the different styles and architectural components of shrines borrowed terms directly from ancient architecture, such as the Palatial style (宮殿式), the Grand Mansion style (樓閣式) and the Pagoda style (塔式). The *zitan* shrine presented here is of palatial style construction.

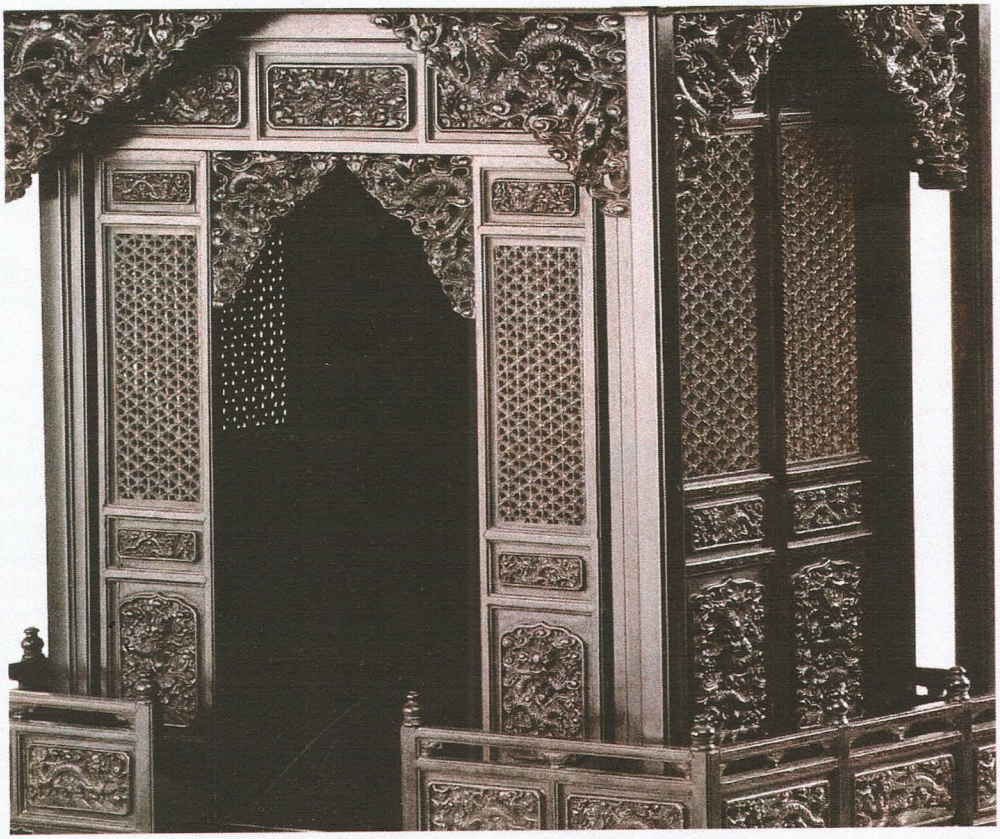
Historically, palatial style architecture was always the centre or focal point in ancient city planning. The important central position was reserved for the construction of the palace compound—a conceptual layout established since the Shang dynasty (circa 1600–1100 BC).[2] Following suit, the grandest of Buddhist shrines were of palatial style, and were reserved for housing the most important icons used in religious ceremonies for the imperial family. According to the sumptuary system of the Qing dynasty—a system based on traditions passed down from prior dynasties—palatial style architecture could only be used for landmark buildings of the imperial family.

Besides different styles of structure, Qing dynasty buildings were also differentiated in status by the types and decorations of the roof, the number of bays and columns, the decorative content of the brackets (雀替) and the number of horizontal dividers between the carved sections of the screen panel (隔扇 or *geshan*). The configuration and combination of each of the architectural components and the use of each of the decorative elements followed a hierarchical framework.

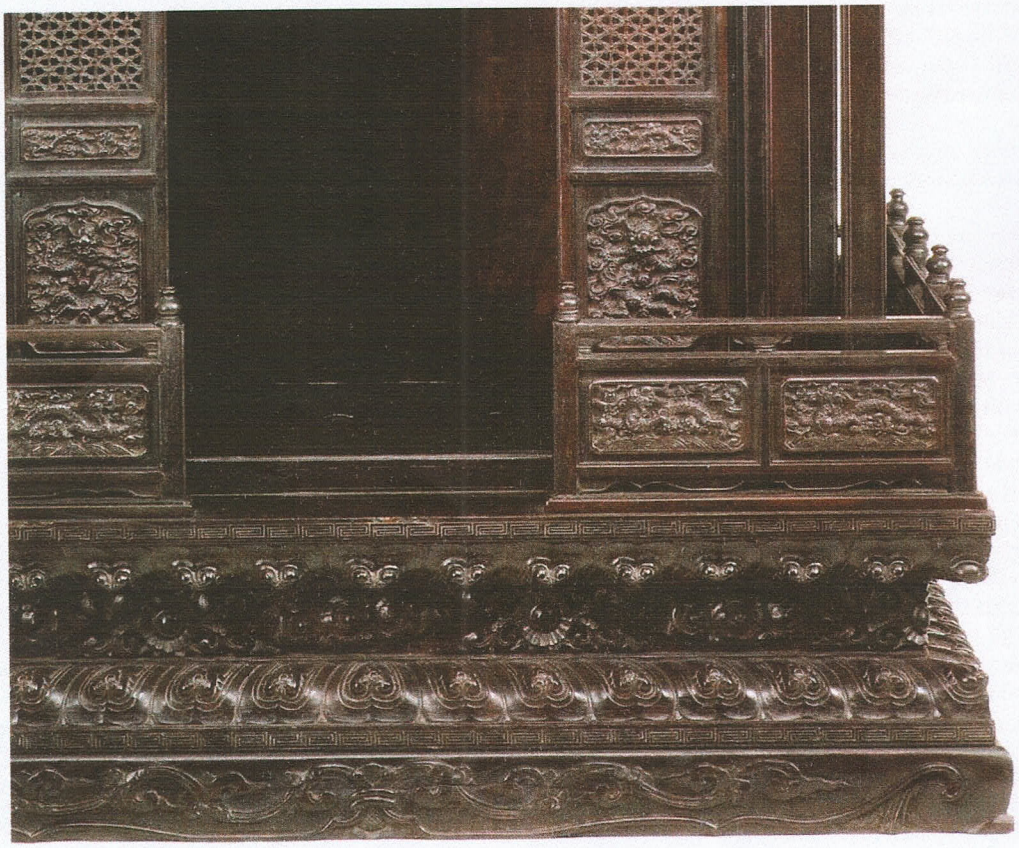
An example of this can be seen in reference to the styles of roof structures in ancient Chinese palatial buildings. Roof styles included the *Wu-tian-ding* (廡殿頂), the *Xie-shan-ding* (歇山頂), the *Xuan-shan-ding* (懸山頂) and the *Ying-shan-ding* (硬山頂), among others. Of these styles, the *Wu-tian-ding* and the *Xie-shan-ding* were the grandest and most important in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, and were therefore reserved solely for very important buildings. Of the buildings in the Forbidden City, only the Tai He Palace Hall (太和殿) was given a multi-eave *Wu-tian-ding* roof while the Bao He Palace Hall (保和殿) was given a multi-eave *Xie-shan-ding* roof. Most of the other palatial buildings were given the *Ying-shan-ding* roof. The Tai He Palace and the Bao He Palace were considered most important buildings—Tai He Palace was used to receive foreign envoys and thus served a role in projecting the grandeur and majesty of the Qing empire; Bao He Palace was the conference hall used by the emperor and his senior court officials to discuss important matters of state. Of these two centrally positioned palatial style buildings, the Bao He Palace was deemed more important historically as it is the only palatial building remaining from the Ming dynasty; all other palace halls and buildings were rebuilt in the early Qing dynasty.

Internal architectural components also reflected a hierarchical system. The opened carved screen panels were used in ancient architecture as a device to define the interior

[2] Please see the archaeological report on the tomb of Fuhao, Yin Ruins, compiled by the archaeology department of the Chinese Social Science Academy, Wenwu Publication House, 1980.



Close-up of *zitan* shrine of palatial style construction; every detail was meticulously and properly executed



Palatial style shrines housed the most important icons used in religious ceremonies for the imperial family

space. In the Qing dynasty, there were five different levels of screen panels, and the use of the different levels was strictly regulated according to one's social position. The level of a screen panel was indicated by the number of horizontal bars/dividers used. There were altogether five levels, with the highest level having six horizontal dividers, the next level five, with the lowest level having two dividers. Screen panels in palace buildings have at least five dividers, which importantly also strengthens the construction. Screen panels with four dividers are normally found on monastery or smaller buildings.

Architectural Structure of a Palatial Buddhist Shrine

Despite the strict regulation of building styles, imperial architecture was over time still subject to practical, political, functional, social and historical requirements. Reflecting such influences, court architecture evolved to integrate different decorative elements. Perhaps one of the most notable features of Qing imperial architecture, which came directly as a result of Buddhist influence, is the representational style of the base, the *Xia* (下) structure. According to the specifications set out in the classic architecture and carpentry manual, "Treatise on Architectural Methods or State Building Standards" (營造法式),[3] a structure of palatial construction consists of three main sections—*Shang* (上), *Zhong* (中) and *Xia* (下). The *Shang* refers to the roof with its bracket supporting system; the *Zhong* refers to the bays and columns representing the body of a building; and the *Xia* refers to the base and foundation.

The base was once referred to as the *tai jie* (台階) or *di zuo* (底座), but with the arrival of Buddhism, it became commonly known as the *Xumi Zuo* (須彌座). The term *Xumi* is actually a transliteration of "Sumeru", the Sanskrit name for the central world mountain—believed to be the tallest mountain in Buddhist cosmology. *Zuo* means base or foundation in Chinese. The adoption of a Buddhist name for their architectural terminology indicates the extent of Buddhist influence in China at that time. Along with its name, the design of the base was also influenced by Buddhist imagery. The base seen in Shang dynasty archaeological artefacts is represented flush, without any waist and very often without much decoration; when decorated, the motifs used were the *Kui* dragon, *leiwen* (thunder motif) or bird images. During the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, after the arrival of Buddhism, elongated begonia and other floral motifs usually decorated the base. The representational style of the base thus transitioned from the original clean forms with simple decorative motifs to much more energetic and vigorous designs with different varieties of decorative motifs reflective of Buddhist beliefs. Motifs such as lotus petals and fan lotus became popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In addition, the form and expression of the base were no longer just flush on all sides, but displayed high or short waists and even steps cascading upwards and downwards.[4]

Description of the Buddhist Shrine

The *zitan* shrine under discussion displays characteristics in keeping with the strict regulations of imperial architecture as well as Buddhist influence, as discussed above. Several

Back of the *zitan* wooden shrine

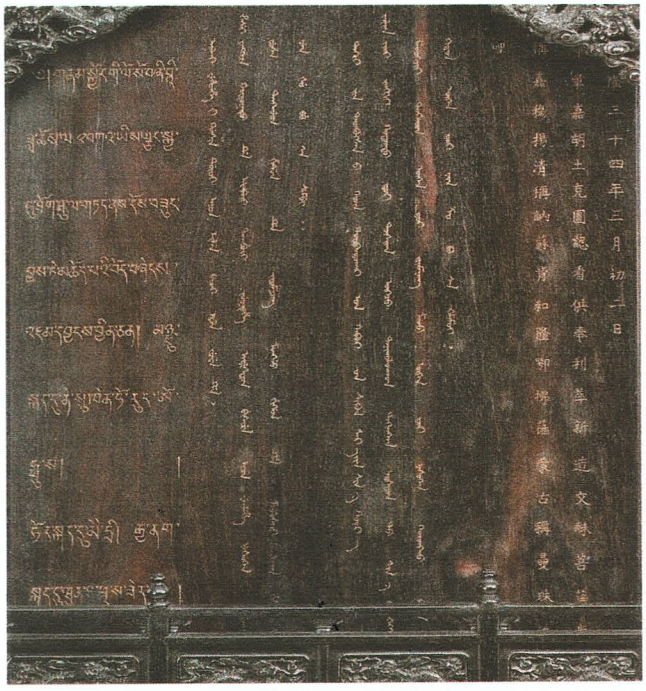
features provide evidence of the shrine's important status. Notably, the shrine has a multi-eave *Xie-shan-ding* roof, a feature that places it on a par with the prestigious Bao He Palace. Even though we do not know for whom this icon was made, the roof structure strongly indicates that it was intended for imperial use. The *zitan* shrine's screen panels have six dividers, which is also suggestive of its imperial status.[5] The single-bay mid structure (*zhong*), however, also reveals that it was made within the least important order of the imperial hierarchy. It is most probable that the shrine housed a prominent religious icon given as tribute to the Qing court by a senior leader of an ethnic group.

Like the Bao He Palace, the roof of the shrine is constructed with double eaves, resembling a swallow stretching its wings before flight, which is considered aesthetically pleasing. The double-eave roof is decorated with carved wooden fixtures representing different types of mythical animals that were used to guard important imperial palatial buildings. The body of the shrine has one bay enclosed

[3] The "Treatise on Architectural Methods or State Building Standards", or *Yingzao Fashi*, published during the Song dynasty (960–1127), provided blueprints for imperial construction, which were strictly followed and enforced until the end of the Qing dynasty.

[4] Examples of the Shang dynasty base structure can be found on page 36 and of the Tang dynasty base on page 355, *Chinese Bronzes: Selected Articles from Orientations 1983–2000*, Hong Kong, 2001.

[5] Screens with five or six dividers were reserved for members of the imperial family only.



The inscription in Chinese, Manchurian, Mongolian and Tibetan points to the shrine's imperial origins

by six beaded angular columns. The tops of the railings around the bay and the columns are decorated with a total of twelve pagoda-like fixtures, and the sixteen carved panels that make up the railings are each decorated with a flying dragon in high-relief style. The base of the shrine is waisted with decorations of lotus petals and fan lotus/trailing plants in high-relief style. The space within the bay and angular columns is enclosed by six screen panels, which were open carved on the top and relief carved on the lower section. A pair of opened carved corbels (雀替 or *queti*) decorates the front pair of screen panels as well as each of the columns. The size of the *queti* corbels on this shrine is unusually large, which was likely for aesthetic reasons.

In a synthesis of imperial and Buddhist influences, the flying eaves with superb bracket-supporting systems, purlins and beams are of traditional Chinese style, while the decoration of lotus petals and fan lotus on the base shows strong Tibetan Buddhist influence. Other notable features showing the skilful fusion of different ethnicities and cultures are the traditional joinery construction—without the use of nails—and the use of *leiwen* along the edges of the base to enclose the lotus petals and fan lotus motifs. Each architectural component, such as the railings and the *queti* corbels, is decorated with dragon and lotus petal motifs in high relief. The style of decoration and the extraordinarily fine craftsmanship make this shrine a gem of Qing imperial art.

Similar Examples

Two other shrines made of *zitan* wood in the Summer Villa show similarities in style, execution and craftsmanship—one was built in the palatial style with a double eave *Xieshan-ding* roof and the other was constructed in the grand mansion style. The structure and appearance of the one built in the palatial style is similar to the shrine discussed in this article, except it has five bays. The logbooks that record the creation of shrines note that Emperor Qianlong often liked to group the icons presented to him as tribute in sets, in accordance with the type of material, craftsmanship, and origin of each. On receiving a group of important gilt icons, the emperor would have instructed his workshops to design shrines worthy of the status of the icon as well as its donor. Religious icons in the same group would have similar shrines, but be differentiated by various decorative elements such as the addition of gilt decoration on the roof or the railings, etc. The emperor would also provide suggestions on how to differentiate decoration to show the various cosmic realms of divinity of each icon. Manjsuri is, and has always been, a very important bodhisattva in both Chinese Buddhism and the Yellow Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore it is not surprising that the palatial architectural design was chosen for this icon. The similarity in the style of engraving and decoration of the two shrines suggests that they were part of a group of shrines built in the palatial style especially for the Imperial Summer Villa.

The belief that the original sanctuary of the shrine under discussion was the Summer Villa is reasonable when we consider the fact that shrines built for the Imperial Palace in Beijing were normally placed in the inner court, which was for residential use and therefore would not require a structure of this size. More importantly, shrines built for the Summer Villa needed to manifest the majesty of the imperial family, given that the Qing emperor received the Eight Banner and other tribal chiefs there. Therefore, it was important for shrines to have the requisite elements displaying the regality of the sovereign as well as the different ethnic groups under his sovereignty. The *zitan* shrine under discussion certainly achieved the aim of balancing religious and political dimensions. Significantly, it reveals the emperor's intention to invoke the blessings of Manjusri for all his people; and it is therefore also a symbol of national unification and commonwealth. The message of unification is further enhanced by the shrine's physical appearance, which is a harmonious integration of artistic elements from China's different ethnic cultures.

The infusion of different cultural influences during the Qianlong reign is only a small part in a long history of cross-cultural and ethnic interactions. Traditional architectural elements passed down from the archaic Shang dynasty in central China went through different transitions and integrations through the Zhou dynasty (circa 1046–256 BC) to the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), absorbing elements from the various tribes who ruled. The introduction of Buddhism to China in the 1st century brought Gandharan artistic traditions as well as Greco elements inherited in Gandhara art—this influence blossomed in China with the infusion of different nomadic traditions synergised with what had been established as the dominant Chinese culture. At the decline of the Tang dynasty, other ethnic groups—the Jin, the Khitan, the Mongolians and the Tibetans—also exerted their influence, thus enriching Chinese art. The artistic traditions of Tibetan Buddhism fascinated the Qing court and found a firm footing in China. This shrine gives these otherwise intangible ethnic artistic influences a physical form, and clearly represents the spiritual history of the people of China.