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‘Thoroughly Chinese’: Revealing the plants of the Hong merchants’ gardens through John Bradby Blake’s paintings

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John Bradby Blake’s paintings should be admired for their sophisticated arrangement of accurate botanical features and vivid colouring, but they have a greater significance than just their artistic value. They not only represent a range of plants previously unknown to the west, but the majority also reveal a range of plants grown in the gardens of Chinese in Guangzhou (Canton): therefore they provide a precious insight into a thus far relatively neglected topic in Chinese garden history, namely the cultivation of plants in gardens.¹ This paper identifies one of the gardens from which the plants depicted might have come, and looks at how plants were used and appreciated in their Chinese context.

Contextualising John Bradby Blake’s stay in China

In order to obtain the Chinese plants he painted in the 1760-70s, we know that Blake had to rely on a network of Chinese gardeners and merchants. To put such a task into context, Blake visited China during the Canton Trade or System period (1757-1842), when Western European and North American visitors to China - hereafter designated by as ‘Westerners’ – were only allowed to visit the southern cities of Guangzhou (Canton) and Macao.² When Blake left for China, he did so as a supercargo for the East India Company, although he had additional ambitions such as his painting project. Throughout the Canton Trade period, Western merchants wanting to make business with China were also obliged to use specific intermediaries during their transactions: the Hong merchants, whom were among the wealthiest of Guangzhou merchant elite.³ If they managed to avoid bankruptcy, the Hong merchants could make fortunes from both the Western trade and the East Asia trade (or Junk Trade), fortune which was partially spent by providing luxurious living conditions for their family, such as residences with gardens, and buying an official rank.⁴

¹ This remark is mostly valid for publications in Western languages, a notable exception being the work of Georges Métaillié, see for example Georges Métaillié, ‘Some Hints on “Scholar Gardens” and Plants in Traditional China’, *Studies in The History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 18.3 (1998), 248–56. See also the ‘Plants’ section in Stanislaus Fung, ‘Guide to Secondary Sources on Chinese Gardens’, *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 18.3 (1998), 269–86.

² Valery M Garrett, *Heaven Is High, the Emperor Far Away: Merchants and Mandarins in Old Canton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 76.

³ See W. E. Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), LXX.

⁴ To obtain a deep insight into the both Western China Trade and Junk Trade see Paul Van Dyke’s publications, starting with Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845*

The Hong merchants were also responsible for assuaging any incidents between their Western guests and locals, which amounted to a quasi-diplomatic role, and often implied mutual respect and even friendship. For this reason, Western visitors relied on the Hong merchants to allow them access to a number of sites south of Guangzhou.⁵ These included a temple in Henan and an area of pleasure grounds and plant nurseries in Huadi (Fa-tee) 花地 (see Figure 1).⁶ Additionally, the Hong merchants often invited or otherwise allowed Westerners to visit their own gardens. Western visitors including traders often purchased what is called ‘China Trade art’, some to be sold and some as souvenirs to remember their time in Guangzhou. Among these were Chinese export paintings representing the few sites that they were allowed to visit, including the Hong gardens.

As John Bradby Blake wrote in his letters, Western visitors were “literally imprisoned” in Guangzhou, living in the narrow Factories (see Figure 1) during the trade season, and then in Macao.⁷ If Western traders’ movements were so limited, including Blake’s, we are left wondering where he obtained the plants represented in his painting albums. In his own letters Blake wrote that in order to circumvent these rules, he paid Chinese collectors to roam the countryside around Guangzhou, and bring him back their findings: Western naturalists often used such a tactic during the Canton Trade period.⁸ Since British naturalists did not have much footing at this period in China, Blake must have also relied on his contacts with Jesuits to receive plants from Beijing. Yet an analysis of the plants represented in Blake’s paintings reveals a large number of local species⁹. It is likely that Blake followed the example of William Kerr, a collector appointed by Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society and Director of Kew gardens, that gathered specimen from the plant nurseries in Huadi.¹⁰

(Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

⁵ Holman James Holman, *Travels in China, New Zealand, New South Wales, Van Diemen’s Land, Cape Horn ...* (G. Routledge, 1840), p. 128.

⁶ This map is based on the *Plan of the City & suburbs of Canton*, drawn by the Quarter Master General's Department, dated 31 October 1857, references MAPS.350.85.1 and MAPS.350.85.2 in Cambridge University Library, Maps room.

⁷ ‘Extract of letter from John Bradby Blake, Esq...to his father John Blake, Esq...November/December 1772’, Oak Spring Garden Foundation, John Bradby Blake Collection, Plants and Letters, p.38.

⁸ Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 27.

⁹ See Wang Hongwen’s article in this edition.

¹⁰ Fan, p. 25.

Additionally, there is little doubt that Blake would have needed the help of the Hong merchants at some point of his endeavors: they would have either owned or known how to obtain the desired plants, or procured the authorization for him to hire local gardeners or collectors. When Blake arrived in China for the first time in 1767, he would have been assigned to a Hong merchant, although we do not know which one in particular. The most prominent Hong merchant during the period of Blake's stay in Guangzhou was Pan Zhencheng 潘振承 (1714-88) or Pan Khequa I: active since 1750, Pan Khequa I became head of the Hong merchants in 1755 and this until his death in 1788.¹¹ Since the Pan family is the better documented among the Hong merchants of the period, we will assume for argument's sake that Blake was under their care until his untimely death in 1773.

The Pan owned the oldest trade firm, named the Tongyang Company 同孚行, and were the most enduring Hong merchant family: since bankruptcy was common in this line of work, this fact reveals the Pan's impressive business acumen. It is likely that Blake would have been invited to a Hong merchant's dinner during his stay in Guangzhou, as part of Sino-Western polite exchanges. Among Western descriptions of banquets given by Hong merchants, the Pan residence appears the most often: typically the guests would be invited to visit the garden before the dinner, and perhaps attend a play or firework show in the garden courtyard after eating.¹² Blake would also have been able to visit Hong merchant's gardens for leisure, and several times a month he would have been allowed to stroll among the nurseries of the Huadi area.¹³ A Chinese export painting titled "garden scene" (Figure 2) and held in the Victoria & Albert museum gives a rudimentary idea of the plant displays that Blake would have seen in the Huadi nurseries.¹⁴

The Pan's Dongyuan garden

Coincidentally, the construction of the Pan properties started approximately in 1770 at a time when Blake would have been present in Guangzhou. The first Pan garden was built in

¹¹ W. E. Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), p. 82. Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Success and Failure in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade* (Baltimore, Maryland: Project Muse, 2016), p. 94.

¹² May-bo Ching, 'Chopsticks or Cutlery?: How Canton Hong Merchants Entertained Foreign Guests in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in *Narratives of Free Trade: The Commercial Cultures of Early US-China Relations* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), pp. 99–199.

¹³ These rules are notably recorded in William C Hunter, *The 'Fan Kwae' at Canton before Treaty Days, 1825-1844* (Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Pub. Co., 1965), p. 29.

¹⁴ The painting is a watercolour and ink on pith paper made by an unknown painter in Guangzhou, c. 1850-70.

Huadi: named the Dongyuan, it was built for Pan Khequa I's enjoyment in his old age. Soon after the largest Pan property was completed, this time in Henan (See Figure 1). It is unlikely that it was finished by the time of Blake's death in 1773. Composed of an ancestral hall, living quarters, and several gardens, the earliest time the Henan property would have been finished is around 1776.¹⁵

To determine the appearance of the gardens Blake would have been able to visit, we need to combine written and pictorial sources from both Chinese and Western origins. Some of these accounts were contemporary or written in the decades after his death. For example, a close friend of the Pan by the name of Zhang Weiping 张维屏 (1780-1859) notably wrote a series of poems describing his stay in the Dongyuan. These near-contemporary sources are particularly convincing as Zhang Weiping lived in the garden for nine years.¹⁶ When Pan Youdu 潘有度 (1755-1820) took over the position of his father after his death in 1788 and became Pan Khequa II, his brother Pan Youwei 潘有为 (1744 -1821) retired from official life and moved in the Henan residence. Pan Khequa II and his brother Pan Youwei, whom Westerners nicknamed 'the Squire', are the most frequently named Chinese in Western naturalists' description of plant collecting during the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

According to Zhang Weiping, the Dongyuan was sparsely built, but abounded in vegetation. In the preface to the *Miscellaneous poems on the Dongyuan* he listed the garden's vegetation such as bamboo, lichen and lotus flowers. He moreover enumerated a number of fruits and vegetables cultivated for the household's meals: Chinese cabbage, tangerine, pomelo, green vegetables and fruits.¹⁸ He noted that the garden contained five old Chinese 'water pines' (*shuisong* 水松) one of which was hundred years old, with a trunk reaching to the sky.

¹⁵ Bo Qin, Bing Li, and Guorong Li, *Secret Records of Foreign Trade in Qing Dynasty* (Qingchao yangshang midang 清朝洋商秘档) (Beijing: Jiu zhou chu ban she, 2010). (p.132)

¹⁶ Guodong Chen, 'Pan Youdu or Pan Khequa II: A Successful Hong Merchant (Pan Youdu (Pan Qiguan ershi): yiwei chengong de yanghang shangren 潘有度 (潘启官二世): 一位成功的洋行商人)', in *The Thirteen Hongs in Guangzhou* (Guangzhou shisanhang cangsan 广州十三行沧桑) (Guangdongsheng ditu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 150–93 (p. 153).

¹⁷ James Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage, in 1811 and 1812, to Madras and China; Returning by the Cape of Good Hope and St. Helena; in the H. C. S. the Hope, Capt. James Pendergrass*. (London, JNichols, son, and Bentley etc, 1814), p. 199.

¹⁸ Zhang Weiping's preface to the *Dongyuan zayong* (Miscellaneous poems on the Dongyuan) 《东园杂诗》 from *Zhang Nanshan quanji* (Complete collection of Zhang Nanshan's works) 《张南山全集》 in Jianhua Chen, *Guangzhou dadian* (Comprehensive dictionary of Guangzhou) 广州大典, Guangzhou, Guangzhou chubanshe, 2015, pp. 735, booklet 11, ff. 16.16a.

Pan Youwei also described the garden's plants, such as lychees trees, a flower nursery, as well as kapok and plum trees.¹⁹

Although the different plants contained in the Dongyuan would have been interesting to a Western naturalist, Zhang Weiping's accounts are not particularly helpful to visualise the garden's layout. In order to gain such a visual understanding, it is helpful to consult a Chinese export painting kept in the British Library (Figure 3).²⁰ The gouache was produced around 1800 and represents a Chinese garden scene. It has been speculated that the garden represented is in fact one of the Pan properties, because of a handwritten inscription on the borders that reads 'Puan Kequa'.²¹ Since a Western hand could have added these words at a later date, it is uncertain whether this painting represents one of the Pan gardens, and which one precisely.

The studios in Guangzhou that specialised in export paintings are well known for producing realistic renderings of the successive Western Factories' cityscape as they changed in time: the precision of these paintings allowed historians to reconstitute the different phases of Western residence during the Canton Trade period.²² It is possible that the British Library painting is a realistic view of a garden in Guangzhou, although whether it was a contemporary garden is uncertain as we know at least of two examples of a similar view painted at later periods. Nevertheless, the square pavilion featured in the centre of the painting holds a sign that reads as 'Six pines kiosk', which is reminiscent of one of the Pan's properties named the 'Six Pines Garden'. According to Wang, it is therefore reasonable to think that the British Library export painting was modelled, perhaps loosely, on one of Pan's gardens.²³

¹⁹ Pan Youwei, *Yongdongyuan ten quatrains* (咏东园十绝句) in Jianhua Chen, *Comprehensive Dictionary of Guangzhou* (广州大典), ed. by Chunliang Cao (Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 2015), LVI, pp. 457, booklet 30.

²⁰ The painting is a gouache made by an unknown artist in Guangzhou before 1806, at which date it was deposited in the East India Company's Library and Museum. Currently held in the British Library, Visual Art collection item, reference Add.Or.2127.

²¹ See online British Library catalogue for item 'Add.Or.2127'.

²² See Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton: Western Merchants in South China 1700-1900, as Seen in Chinese Export Paintings* (London: English Art Books, 2009); Paul Arthur Van Dyke and Maria Kar-Wing Mok, *Images of the Canton Factories, 1760-1822 Reading History in Art* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ Press, 2015).

²³ See "7. Painting of gardens and mansions" p.100-136 of Volume 3 in Cicheng Wang, Andrew H-B Lo, and British Library, *Chinese Export Paintings of the Qing Period in The British Library* (大英圖書館特藏中國清代外銷畫精華) (*Chinese and English bilingual edition*), 8 volumes (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2011).

The composition of the painting is centred on the square kiosk and a walled geometric pond, with a side building on the left and walls on the right. Six pine trees and smaller bushes are represented directly planted in the soil. The most eye-catching elements in the painting however are a collection of potted plants: the latter are either displayed on the fences surrounding the pond in the foreground and the canal in the background, or put on purpose-made supports. The display of numerous potted plants is one of the characteristics of Guangzhou merchant's gardens of the period. Boston trader Bryant Tilden described in 1816 how Pan Khequa II had potted plants displayed in his gardens, that were "changed every tenth day to suit the old gentleman's fancy; so that he has a new little garden at pleasure."²⁴ The plants displayed would correspond with the British Library painting: a mix of bright flowers, small fruits trees and sweet-smelling species, as well as dwarfed plants or *penjing*.

The prevalence of potted plants in Guangzhou merchants' gardens had a direct impact on the endeavours of British naturalists such as John Bradby Blake and his followers. While most of the countries that British naturalists were sent to 'discover' new species did not have a commercial tradition of plant cultivation, China came with nurseries such as those of Huadi, where plants were grown as disposable items of consumption.²⁵ A member of Guangzhou elite in want of fresh-cut flowers to ornate his banquet table or ever-blooming plants in his garden, only had to have those delivered by boat from the Huadi nurseries and changed at will for an hefty price.²⁶

Foreign naturalists' efforts were probably simplified by the fact that in Guangzhou's nurseries, most plants were already conditioned in pots and easily transported. Although as a result of the Canton Trade's restrictions, at first foreign naturalists could only access the pool of plant species grown and appreciated by the local Chinese, this was balanced by the inefficiency of plant transportation towards Europe and America. For a time Joseph Banks and others struggled to find a system viable enough to guarantee the survival through sea-travel followed by a successful transplantation of Chinese plants in foreign soil.²⁷ After the

²⁴ Bryant Parrott Tilden, 'Bryant P. Tilden Papers, 1781-1851, Also Titled "Father's Journals"', 1851, p. 217, Peabody Essex Museum Phillips Library.

²⁵ Fan, p. 18.

²⁶ Walter William Mundy, *Canton and the Bogue: The Narrative of an Eventful Six Months in China* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1875), pp. 103–5.

²⁷ See John Livingstone, 'Observations on the Difficulties Which Have Existed in the Transportation of Plants from China to England, and Suggestions for Obviating Them. In a Letter to the Secretary. By John Livingstone, Esq. of Macao, in China, Corresponding Member of the Horticultural Society', in *Transactions of the Horticultural Society of London* (The Society, 1820), pp. 421–29.

1820s, the Huadi nurseries progressively lost interest for foreign naturalists as they had exhausted the pool of plants available and felt that the Chinese did not introduce enough botanical novelties for sale.²⁸ Additionally, if the potted plants' original conditioning was not suitable for surviving a long sea-trip to Europe, they would still have been convenient enough for someone like Blake to borrow from a Hong merchant: after all he only needed to bring the pots as far as the Factories or Macao for the time it took to finish a painting.

There are multiple anecdotes about the Pan family members demonstrating that they were not only active players in the global trade exchanges, but also acting as facilitators for global plant exchanges. First of all, Pan Khequa I started his career by trading with Manila and was fluent in Spanish: this perhaps explains why, in the plant lists sent to Joseph Banks by William Kerr, are mentioned several plants from Manila.²⁹ Records of the British East India Company show that one of Pan Khequa I's sons was posted in Suzhou, a city famed for elegant private gardens and with a climate closer to that of Britain: this was an ideal location from which to send plants that did not naturally grow in sub-tropical Guangzhou, such as the moutan (in Chinese *mudan* 牡丹), a type of shrubby peony.³⁰ The Duncan brothers who were collecting plants for Banks, reported how they obtained knowledge about the moutan's nature and habits directly from Pan Khequa II. Banks himself received a letter from Pan Khequa II accompanying a gift of plants, notably a venerable *penjing* intended as present for the Queen.³¹

In the United States, Pan Khequa II was also recognised as an important player in global plant exchanges. Bryant Tilden noted that Pan Khequa II was made a member of the Massachusetts Agricultural society, a position likely honorary but nonetheless noteworthy. In 1818 he also recorded that “[Pan Khequa II] often enquires about agriculture and gardening in America, and is pleased when presented with seeds from other countries, of which I brought him a plentiful supply from home”, implying that the plant exchange went both ways.³² In

²⁸ From a letter written by John Reeves, from Clapham, on October 21, 1834. J. Reeves, ‘VIII. Biography of Consequa’, *The Gardener's Magazine and Register of Rural & Domestic Improvement*, 1835, 111–12 (p. 112).

²⁹ Kew Royal Botanical Gardens Archives, “Letters from William Kerr to both Joseph Banks and William Aiton - around 1804-1812”, for example “Seeds for His Majesty's garden, 3rd March 1809”, entry 118 indicates “Manilla”.

³⁰ Fan, p. 34.

³¹ See British Library, add. MS. 33981, folio 261

³² Tilden, pp. 217–19.

another passage, Tilden explains how he brought a number of native American turtles as an addition to Pan Khequa II's collection of birds and fishes.³³

John Reeves (1774–1856), member of the (British) Horticultural Society's Chinese Committee, noted in the 1835 edition of the *Gardener's Magazine* that Pan Khequa II's brother Pan Youwei was the “only Chinese that paid any decided attention to flowers”. Although Reeves implying that the Chinese lacked a serious taste for plants shows bias, his assessment of Pan Youwei was credible: Reeves repeatedly visited the ‘Squire’ and wrote to Banks in 1812 that his host owned no less than 2-3000 pots of chrysanthemums.³⁴

The Wu's Fuyinyuan, or Howqua's garden

In order to further our understanding of plant displays in Guangzhou, and visualise more accurately the appearance of the gardens that Bradby might have witnessed, it is possible to analyse the Dongyuan garden at a later point in time after photographic technology became available. After Pan Khequa II's death in 1820, the position of head of the Hong merchants was assumed by Howqua I or Wu Bingjian 伍秉鑑 (1769— 1843) from the Wu family. Howqua I might well have been the richest man on earth at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as he was successful in growing his global assets by lending money to Western traders and investing, notably in the United States.³⁵ Despite the mounting Sino-Western tensions at the time, Howqua I's Western counterparts respected his business talent and he developed close friendships with Americans.³⁶

The Wu family continued to live on Howqua I's financial assets for a while even after the first Opium War (1839-1842) and the dissolution of the Hong merchants' monopoly in the Treaty of Nanjing of 1842.³⁷ After Howqua I's death, an unidentified member of the Wu family bought the Dongyuan from the Pan in 1846 and renamed it Fuyinyuan.³⁸ It is difficult to know to which extent the layout of the garden changed after it changed hands from the Pan to the Wu. There are multiple Western descriptions of the Fuyinyuan, that often refer to the garden

³³ *Idem*

³⁴ DTC, vol 18, ff.193-4. Dawson Turner Copies, Joseph Bank Correspondence, Department of Botany, Natural History Museum of London

³⁵ An estimation of his fortune at his death in 1843 varied between 15-25 million dollars: ‘China’, *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* (NSW, 2 March 1844), p. 3.

³⁶ R. B Forbes, *Personal Reminiscences* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1882), p. 137.

³⁷ Wong, p. 6.

³⁸ Ren, pp. 47–48.

as “Howqua’s”, because some of the Wu family’s members continued to use this title with Western visitors.³⁹ Below is an analysis of the multiple descriptions available on the Fuyinyuan, in order to contribute towards our understanding of displays of potted plants in the Canton Trade period and its aftermath.

We can obtain a precise idea of the species represented in the potted plants thanks to Scottish botanist Robert Fortune’s description of the Fuyinyuan around 1850s:

“Looking ‘right ahead,’ as sailors say, there is a long and narrow paved walk lined on each side with plants in pots. This view is broken, and apparently lengthened, by means of an octagon arch which is thrown across, and beyond that a kind of alcove covers the pathway. Running parallel with the walk, and on each side behind the plants, are low walls of ornamental brickwork, latticed so that the ponds or small lakes which are on each side can be seen. Altogether the octagon arch, the alcove, the pretty ornamental flower-pots, and the water on each side, has a striking effect, and is thoroughly Chinese. The plants consist of good specimens of southern Chinese things, all well known in England, such, for example, as *Cymbidium sinense*, *Olea fragrans*, oranges, roses, camellias, magnolias, &c., and, of course, a multitude of dwarf trees, without which no Chinese garden would be considered complete.”⁴⁰

Not only does Fortune confirm that in his view the potted plants as a key element of the Fuyinyuan, he also indicates that by the 1850s, none of the plants contained in the garden were new in a British botanist’s eye. Fortune’s description is to be put in its context: after the two Opium Wars and a series of treaties, foreigners had forcefully obtained much greater freedom to visit the Chinese territory, including Guangzhou’s sights. This is the reason why there are no lack of Western written and pictorial sources on Howqua’s garden after the 1840s, most of them mentioning potted plants and the low fences that served to display them. For example, during her visit of 1847, Ida Pfeiffer mentioned potted flowers on terraces and lining walks at one of Howqua’s properties.⁴¹ Henry Taylor whose visit of the garden followed closely that of Pfeiffer, noted that: “Many of the flowers and shrubs are very

³⁹ See for example John Henry Gray, *Walks in the City of Canton ... with an Itinerary* (Hong Kong: De Souza, 1997), p. 651.

⁴⁰ Robert Fortune, *A Residence among the Chinese, Inland, on the Coast, and at Sea Being a Narrative of Scenes and Adventures during a Third Visit to China, from 1853 to 1856: Including Notices of Many Natural Productions and Works of Art, the Culture of Silk, &c. : With Suggestions on the Present War* (London: John Murray, 1857), pp. 215–17.

⁴¹ Ida Pfeiffer, *A Woman’s Journey Round the World from Vienna to Brazil, Chili, Tahiti, China, Hindostan, Persia, and Asia Minor* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), pp. 110–12.

beautiful. They are placed about in different parts of the garden, in odd-looking, yet handsome and costly flower-pots, and on stands and tables in the summer-houses and temples.”⁴²

The most colourful pictorial representation of the Fuyinyuan is probably a gouache on paper kept in the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem (Figure 4). This Chinese export painting is titled “Howqua’s garden” and was made by Chinese painter Tingqua (1809-1870c.) in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴³ On the foreground stands a large tree accompanied by potted flowers, near the bank of a geometrical bricked pond. In the background on the left is represented a water-based kiosk, whose banisters are adorned with more potted flowers. The pond is crossed by a walkway or promenade punctuated by a ‘covered’ bridge. A low brick and ceramic banister runs through the promenade’s length, featuring another set of potted flowers. A photograph taken by Felice Beato in 1860, appears to be the same garden seen from a different angle (Figure 5).⁴⁴ The great similarity between Figure 4 and 5 suggests that the Chinese export painting indeed provided a rather accurate view of the garden, and both images show that the Fuyinyuan contained a large amount of potted flowers in the 1850-60s.
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A series of photographs kept in Royal Museum of British Columbia and taken in 1858 by John Frederick Crease helps understand the use of potted flowers in the Fuyinyuan.⁴⁶ Put side to side, the Crease photographs almost constitute a complete ‘panorama’ of the garden: the reconstitution of the garden’s layout will be the object of a future publication. Among the Crease pictures, of greatest interest for this paper is one particular view of the promenade crossing the Fuyinyuan’s pond (Figure 6). The short ‘screen’ wall pierced by an octagonal door that appears sideways in Beato’s photograph (Figure 5) is here shown frontally in Crease’s picture (Figure 6), with the covered bridge in the background. On each side of the

⁴² Charles Taylor, *Five Years in China: With Some Account of the Great Rebellion and a Description of St. Helena* (Derby & Jackson, 1860), p. 65.

⁴³ Tingqua’s Chinese name was Guan Lianchang 关联昌 and he was especially active in the 1840-50s: Carl L Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities*, 1991, pp. 192–95.

⁴⁴ Felice Beato’s albumen print is titled “Howqua’s gardens, Canton”. The digital image is courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.

⁴⁵ For an explanation regarding the attribution of the Peabody Essex Museum painting and Felice Beato’s photograph as representation of the Fuyinyuan (and not another of Howqua’s garden) see here: Josepha Richard, ‘Uncovering the Garden of the Richest Man on Earth in Nineteenth-Century Canton: Howqua’s Garden in Honam, China’, *Garden History*, 43.2 (2015), 168–81.

⁴⁶ The photograph reproduced here is found under reference HP078415, other photographs of Howqua’s garden in the same series are found under HP078416, HP078419, HP078420, HP078453.

screen wall are the banisters covered in potted flowers, completed by another set of pots on ceramic holders. The plants are so numerous as to occupy most of the frame, hiding almost completely the water-based kiosk in the background on the right side: this composition corresponds perfectly with Fortune's written description quoted above.

The vegetal profusion displayed in the Fuyinyuan was also captured in a stereograph taken by Pierre Joseph Rossier around 1859 (Figure 7).⁴⁷ One of the most interesting features of this view is a trained plant on the right side that has been shaped like a deer. It is not a coincidence if Beato, Crease and Rossier's photographs were all taken around the same time: it corresponds with the Second Opium War or Arrow War (1856-1860), during which Guangzhou was occupied. From the letter accompanying the Crease photographs, we know that soldiers visited or possibly occupied the Fuyinyuan, which explains the number of photographs taken in the garden.⁴⁸

Contextualising the use of potted flowers in 18-19th century Guangzhou gardens

Analysing the gardens of the Pan and Wu families shows the importance of potted flowers as gardening characteristic in 18-19th century Guangzhou. The love for potted flowers was of course not reserved to the Hong merchants. Mrs Gray, who lived with her husband in Guangzhou in the 1880s, observed these gardening habits and declared that:

“In the first place, the Chinese do not grow their flowers in beds, nor let them spread from one to the other as we do. They grow all their flowers in pots. Rows of them line the paths in these gardens, and I have seen lovely shows of them, including roses, cockscombs, camellias, magnolias, chrysanthema, rhododendrons, balsams, azaleas, the narcissus, lotus, etc.”⁴⁹

Perhaps she had the opportunity to visit the Fuyinyuan during her stay: her description matches well with an anonymous view of the Fuyinyuan kept in the Rijksmuseum, where all the pots are lined on makeshift benches (Figure 9).⁵⁰ Yet the extract above shows that Mrs

⁴⁷ This stereograph is kept in the Rijksmuseum, and was part of a series taken by Rossier in Howqua's garden. Some of the other Rossier stereographs are notably kept in the Getty Research Institute.

⁴⁸ John Frederick Crease, 'Letter Dated November 13, 1858 in MS-0055, Box 3, File 28' (Royal British Columbia Museum, 1858).

⁴⁹ John Henry Gray Mrs, *Fourteen Months in Canton* (London: Macmillan, 1880), p. 392, University of Cambridge.

⁵⁰ This photograph confusingly titled "Canton-Chinese summer House of Cha-fao", of unknown painter and date, was probably made after 1860. Kept under reference RP-F-F02380 in the Rijksmuseum.

Gray extrapolated the botanical skill of the whole Chinese nation from observations solely based on Guangzhou gardening characteristics.

Unlike most of her contemporary Western residents of Shamian Island – a foreign concession from 1859-1943 – Mrs Gray was keenly interested in all aspects of Chinese life in Guangzhou.⁵¹ She notably recorded her garden visits accompanied by her husband Mr Gray and a man she names ‘Howqua’, certainly one of Wu Bingjian’s descendants.⁵² At a similar period, we know that paintings loosely based on the Fuyinyuan were used as a background for studio photography (Figure 8). We presume from this shot and others kept in Basel Mission archives that Howqua’s garden was an appealing setting for the local Chinese; moreover the woman in this photograph poses near genuine potted flowers.⁵³

In terms of layout the gardens of the Pan and Wu families did not correspond to the latest fashion in scholar or imperial gardens near the capital or the Jiangnan region. As Craig Clunas explained in his book *Fruitful Sites*, there was a shift mid-17th century from a productive centred garden to a more aestheticized one among scholars, to differentiate themselves from upstart merchants building gardens.⁵⁴ This meant fewer vegetation of greater rarity and a greater prevalence of strangely shaped rocks: the latter’s function was close to that of sculptures in Western landscape tradition. Outside of the capital and Jiangnan region, gardens with geometric walled ponds and an abundance of vegetation were still being built. Yet the mercantile commodification of vegetation was deemed ‘vulgar’ by Ming Jiangnan scholar Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645), in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things* – an influential publication that would have still prevailed in scholars’ minds during the Canton Trade period.⁵⁵

Perhaps the Pan and Wu families had reached a compromise between taking advantage of their trading networks to obtain and produce plants *en masse* and their thirst for social

⁵¹ Dictionary of Guangzhou

⁵² John Henry Gray Mrs, pp. 156–59.

⁵³ This albumen titled “Chinese woman in Punti costume” by an unknown studio, is estimated circa 1890-1903 and kept under reference A-30.12.007 in the Basel Mission Archive. It was also reproduced on a postcard by Mr Sternberg of Hong Kong under the title “A Chinese high class Lady”.

⁵⁴ Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ Zhenheng Wen, *Treatise on Superfluous Things* (Zhangwuzhi 长物志) (Zhonggu: Nanhai wu shi, 1874). 2:41, as cited by Yuen Lai Winnie Chan, ‘Nineteenth Century Canton Garden and the East-West Plant Trade’, in *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West*, Issues & Debates (Los Angeles, California: Getty Research Institute, 2015), pp. 111–23 (p. 117).

acceptance among the elite literati circles. Their efforts to reach a higher social status involved the sponsoring of local temples, and inviting local scholars to gatherings in their gardens. The aesthetic appeal they might have found in a profusion of colourful potted plants can be understood by examining a Chinese export painting titled “A garden scene” and held in the Hong Kong Museum of Art (Figure 10).⁵⁶ The pots of various flowers seem to be the main focus of the painting: pots are found lined in the foreground, and on banisters or on individual stands in the background.

Both merchants invested in their children’s education to pass official examinations, and as a result both families included members deeply interested in collecting paintings, poetry and art. Pan Khequa I’s numerous descendants wrote countless anthologies of poems, usually named after their own gardens.⁵⁷ Howqua I’s son Wu Chongyao 伍崇曜 (1810-1863) notably procured the funding and collaborating in compiling three anthologies of local texts.⁵⁸ According to Stephen Miles, this corresponds to a general drive in early 19th century Guangzhou resident scholars to research the local history and culture.⁵⁹ One of the most relevant aspects of this drive was that numerous laudatory poems written or compiled on local flora or fauna. This local treasure did not escape John Bradby Blake’s observation: the plants represented in his albums are mostly local species, such as litchis from Guangdong province.

Conclusion

John Bradby Blake’s painting endeavour took place in the context of the early period of the Canton Trade. At that time, foreign naturalists had not yet exhausted the plants available in Guangzhou, whether originated locally or obtained via the Hong merchants’ networks. His letters reveal that Blake relied on a number of Chinese people to gather the plants represented in his paintings, and also grew some of those plants in a garden in Macao. Unwittingly, he must have witnessed one of the most interesting of Guangzhou gardening characteristics at the time: favouring the display and rotation of numerous potted plants. Many of the plants

⁵⁶ The gouache on paper titled “A garden scene” does not correspond as far as I know to a specific garden. Attributed to Guan Lianchang (Tingqua), mid-nineteenth century, is held under reference AH1980.0005.042 in the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

⁵⁷ Wanzhang Zhu, ‘The Pan family and the Lingnan inscription (Panshi jiazhu yu Lingnan ketie 潘氏家族与岭南刻帖)’, in *The thirteen hongts in Guangzhou* (Guangzhou shisanhang cangsang 广州十三行沧桑) (Guangzhou: Guangdongsheng ditu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 129–44 (pp. 131–34).

⁵⁸ Steven Miles, *The Sea of Learning: Mobility and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou* (Cambridge, Mass.: Published by the Harvard University Asia Center : Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 149–52.

⁵⁹ Steven B. Miles, ‘Rewriting the Southern Han (917-971): The Production of Local Culture in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 62.1 (2002), 39–75 (p. 40).

Blake painted were local species, an interest that corresponds with that of Guangzhou's residing scholars of the time engaged in writing poetry on local flora.

Although the Canton System reduced foreigners' movements in China, the fact that individuals such as John Bradby Blake and other botanist enthusiasts came into contact with the Hong merchants instead was probably fortunate. The Hong merchants' motives for collecting plants were not so different from those of their Western associates. Foremost was a desire to acquire a status symbol – Chinese literati that were at the top of social hierarchy in China frequently kept gardens with rare flowers, and the Hong merchants wanted to attain such social circles. More rarely, it could be a personal hobby such as was the case with Pan Youwei. For the Western plant enthusiasts and collectors, finding a new species and bringing it home carried significant prestige, sometimes accompanied by a substantial monetary gain.⁶⁰

The Hong merchants had access to a large network of contacts to obtain plants, whether inside China or internationally, for example in Manila. Contrarily to scholar or imperial gardens the Hong merchants' pleasure grounds and Guangzhou nurseries contained plenty of plants to buy, ready to be carried in pots. Especially when contrasted with the cold reception of Western embassies under the Canton System, the Hong merchants also had an unusual willingness to exchange with Western visitors, discuss the habits of plants to the best of their abilities, and facilitate the hiring of local gardeners.⁶¹ One of the merits of exploring the paintings of John Bradby Blake in the collection of the Oak Spring Garden Foundation is to shed light on the neglected topic of plants in Chinese garden history: Blake's hybrid Sino-British botanical representations also become an introduction to the Chinese side of global natural history.

⁶⁰ Fan, p. 19.

⁶¹ See for example the accounts of Macartney and Amherst embassies: George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China; Including Cursory Observations Made, and Information Obtained in Travelling through That Ancient Empire, and a Small Part of Chinese Tartary. Together with a Relation of the Voyage Undertaken on the Occasion by His Majesty's Ship the Lion, and the Ship Hindostan, in the East India Company's Service, to the Yellow Sea, and Gulf of Peking; as Well as of Their Return to Europe.* (London: G. Nicol, 1797). Henry Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy to China...* (London: Printed for John Murray, 1817).