Opera, flourished under the Manchu while more classic forms, and some would argue far more refined operatic traditions like that of the *kunqu*昆曲, went into decline. Much that is taken as being quintessentially Chinese today—by both Chinese and non-Chinese—is in reality a conflated culture born of the Manchus, a foreign, conquering people. The Manchus laboured assiduously at being worthy of the civilization they had subdued and now, nearly a century after their fall from power and the end of Chinese dynastic politics, the Han-Chinese state is drawing heavily on the tradition of the Manchus to claim its place both at the centre of a modern national civilization, and at the forefront of its future.

The Yuan Ming Yuan, a massive complex of gardens, villas, government buildings, landscapes and vistas, drew on elements of fantasy, of garden and scenic design, of cultural myth and imaginative practice. It was a receptacle for the achievements of élite Han civilization, an imperial museum, storehouse and abode. After its destruction it was plundered for over one hundred years, and only lately, as the Chinese state has defined itself as the vehicle for national expression and cultural unity, has the Yuan Ming Yuan risen to prominence once more—this time not as a centre of political power, but as a symbol of aggrieved nationalism and patriotic outrage.

*Moving Heaven and Earth for the Sovereign*

Before we settle into our ruminations on the remains of the gardens, let me first say a few words about the evolution of the Yuan Ming Yuan.

Today travellers to Peking invariably pay a visit to the Imperial Palace Museum in the centre of the city. The impression given is that this formidable edifice, the Forbidden City紫禁城—the ‘Winter Palace’, was the home to China’s emperors, their Court and the administration from the time of the fall of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty in the mid-fourteenth century to the abdication of the last Qing emperor in 1912. The palace was certainly the centre of political power in the Ming dynasty. From the time that the Manchus swept down from their kingdom in the north-east and established their dynastic capital in Peking in the 1640s, however, they showed little interest in confining themselves to the vast maze of buildings that made up that palace.

The Qing emperors regarded the imperial precinct as prison-like and evinced an eagerness to escape its confines at every opportunity. The Tongzhi同治 Emperor (r.1862–74), quoting one of his predecessors, went so far as to curse the imperial city as “that dank ditch of a place with its verminill walls and tiled roofs.”

Indeed, from the time of the Regent Dorgon多爾袞 (1612–50) and the Emperor Kangxi who ruled from 1662 to 1723, the Manchus showed a desire to govern from more commodious and open surroundings. They had come from the vast lands beyond the Great Wall, and even after the move to Peking from Shengjing盛京 (now Shenyang 沈陽) they maintained the martial habits of their forebears, who enjoyed hunting and living close to the wilds.

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4 紅牆碧瓦黑陰溝. See Liu Dunzhen, ed., “Tongzhi changxiu Yuanmingyuan shiliao” [Historical materials related to the rebuilding of the Garden of Perfect Brightness during the Tongzhi reign], Zhongguo yingzhao xueshe bukan, di 4 juan, er.

5 Dorgon died in 1650, before his plans for an imperial hunting retreat could be realised. See “Duoergun zhuang” [Biography of Dorgon], Qingshi gao [Draft history of the Qing dynasty], juan 218 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), vol.30, p.9030.
As Jonathan Spence wrote in his reconstruction of Kangxi’s life, *Emperor of China*:

The gardens [around Peking] are beautiful: the springs are pure, the grasses fragrant, wooded hills rise among the lakes.

But it is when one is beyond the Great Wall that the air and soil refresh the spirit . . . . As one moves further north the views open up, one’s eyes travel hundreds of miles; instead of feeling hemmed in, there is a sense of freedom.  

While passionate about these pleasures, Kangxi was quick to acquire the refined comforts of the Han imperial lifestyle. Like his successors he was anxious to prove himself worthy of the task of ruling the empire, all the while wary not to fall into the decadent ways that had led to the painful decline and eventual collapse of the Ming dynasty before him.

Kangxi balanced both of his interests as huntsman-monarch and Son of Heaven at his palace in Jehol 熱河, the Chengde Summer Mountain Retreat (Bishu Shanzhuang 避署山莊) beyond the Great Wall, an enclosed hunting ground containing a delicate series of gardens and administrative buildings, and within the confines of the Garden of Joyful Spring (Changchun Yuan 暢春園) on the outskirts of Peking. Located just south of the future Yuan Ming Yuan, the Changchun Yuan was built on the remains of part of an abandoned Ming-dynasty garden, the Qinghua Yuan 清華園 of Li Wei,
Marquis of Wuqing 武清侯李偉. Deeply influenced by his travels in the south and visits to famous gardens like the Jichang Yuan 奇暢園 in Wuxi 無錫, Kangxi created here a large country dwelling dotted with lakes, man-made hillocks, artificial stone mazes and pavilions designed in the style of traditional southern retreats.9 The emperor spent much time in the garden and oversaw the administration of the empire both from there and from Jehol. In 1709, around the time that Peter the Great initiated work on St Petersburg—what was to be his “window on the West”—and at the dawn of an age of splendid imperial and private garden-building in England and Europe, Kangxi began the landscaping of the northern precincts of the old Qingshua Yuan some twenty kilometers from the heart of the capital and just to the north of his own residence.

The area was already crowded with numerous gardens and pleasures containing intricate waterways and interconnected lakes dating from the Ming10; over a dozen enclosures dotted the landscape, taking advantage of the marshy area and the ample supply of water from the Jade Source, the Jingming Yuan 靜明園, to the west.11 Although the remodelling of the Qingshua Yuan was undertaken for his son and successor Yinzhen 胤禛, the future Yongzheng 順正 Emperor (r.1723–36), Kangxi was so enthralled by the new garden and by one particular pavilion, the Peony Terrace (Mudan Tai 牡丹臺),12 named for its abundant flowers, that he began holding court there himself. He called the garden ‘Yuan Ming Yuan’, or the Garden of Perfect Brightness, and a plaque with these three words written in his own hand was hung in the pavilion.13 Qianlong, who often saw his grandfather at the Peony Terrace, defined the name Kangxi had chosen thus: “The meaning of Yuan 圆, [is] ‘round’ or ‘perfect’, and Ming 明, ‘bright’, is the golden mean of a gentleman.”14 Yongzheng interpreted the name as “Perfection that allows one to arrive at the most mysterious realm, meaning that the gentleman always cleaves to the Middle Way; while Brightness of ability that shines over everything achieves wisdom for those who are worthy.”15

Following Kangxi’s demise and a three-year period of mourning, Yongzheng had the garden repaired and expanded, thereafter effectively moving the court there. He instructed his ministers that “My residence at the Yuan Ming Yuan is in no way different from my presence in the palace [in the centre

Figure 3

Digital reconstruction of the imperial inscription for the Yuan Ming Yuan (Zhida Computer Company, 1996)

9 See Liu Tong, Dijing jingwu lüe [Outline of the sights of the imperial capital] (Beijing: Beijing Guji Chubanshe, 1982), and Xuanye 玄禎 (Kangxi), “Changchun yuan ji” [A record of the Garden of Joyful Spring], in Guren bixiade Beijng fengguang [The scenery of Peking as described by the ancients], ed. Zhang San (Beijing: Zhongguo Lixiu Chubanshe), pp.128–9. Under Qianlong it was the residence of the emperor’s mother. The Changchun Yuan later fell into ruin. During the Republic it was converted in an army drill ground. It is now a parking lot abutting rice-fields west of the Shao Yuan 陶園, the dormitory complex reserved for foreign students and scholars at Peking University.


11 Ibid. Details of some of the dozens of private villas (zhaiyuan宅園) can be found in Jiao Xiong, Beijng Xijiao zhaiyuan ji [An account of the private villas in the Western outskirts of Peking] (Beijing: Beijing Yanshan Chubanshe, 1996).

12 Later renamed Loushe Yuan 長河開雲, Engraved Moon and Open Clouds. Peonies had been a feature of gardens in the area since the Ming, and were celebrated by writers like Yuan Hongdiao 袁宏道 who recorded a trip to the Mudan Yuan 牡丹園 outside Fuchengmen Gate 阜成門.


明而普照，達人之睿智也。
Figure 4
Woodblock illustration of the jichang Yuan, Wuxi (from Linqing, Tracks in the Snow)

16 “Shizong shilu, Yongzheng sannian bayue” [Veritable record of the Emperor Shizong; eighth month of the third year of the Yongzheng reign], in Qingshilu, Shizong shilu 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), vol.7, p.536.
17 November 1996.

Figures 5 & 6
The Audience Hall from Forty Scenes of the Yuan Ming Yuan by Shen Yuan 沈源 and Tang Dai 唐岱, commissioned by Qianlong
The site of the Audience Hall with commemorative stele today

of Peking. All matters will be dealt with in exactly the same fashion.”16 An impressive, though relatively modest, Audience Hall (the Hall of Probity, Zhengda Guangming 正大光明) was constructed with buildings and bureaux for the management of government set to one side.

As we consider the early history of the gardens I will illustrate my comments with images taken from the paintings commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor of his favourite scenes in the gardens at the height of their glory. To give you an idea of the palimpsest effect that these images have on contemporary visitors to the palace grounds, I have juxtaposed them with photographs I took of the Yuan Ming Yuan this November.17
The main imperial residence was spread over nine artificial islands built around a lake that was dug out behind the Audience Hall. These nine islands symbolized the “Nine Realms” (jiuzhou 九州) of the empire, and from his apartments on the first island, called “Clear and Calm [View of] Nine Realms” (jiuzhou qingyan 九州清晏), the emperor could survey the world in microcosm.\(^\text{18}\)

Although the scale of the gardens remained fairly modest, Yongzheng’s designs revealed a fascination with the kinds of architectural folly that would become such a central feature of the garden palaces during the eighteenth century. Averse to the pleasures of the hunt, favoured by both his imperial father and his son, Yongzheng rarely left Peking and concentrated his sybaritic energies instead on construction work at the Yuan Ming Yuan.\(^\text{19}\)


Of the buildings he had constructed, Yongzheng favoured in particular a large and auspicious swastika- or fylfot-shaped pavilion named “Peace and Harmony in Ten-thousand Directions” (Wanfang Anhe 萬方安和). It sat in a lake to the west of the Nine Realms; another swastika-styled structure is to be found in the Sea Palaces in the centre of Peking. Yongzheng often used the building as his private apartments, the very shape of which represented the number 10,000 (wan 萬), or myriad, and in playful contrast to it a smaller building in the shape of the Chinese character for ten (shi 十) was raised at the southern tip of the lake (see Figures 9 and 10).

Pavilions in the design of other Chinese characters were also constructed in the gardens, and within the maze of man-made lakes, knolls and valleys large structures could be found that delineated the words for ‘field’ (tian 天), ‘work’ (gong 工), as well as one in the shape of ‘mountain’ (shan 山) and yet another built to resemble the character for ‘mouth’ (kou 口).21 Numerous elements of fantasy were also incorporated into the landscape as it was transformed over the years, inspired by poems or, in the case of the Fairy Island and Jade Terrace (Pengdao Yaotai 蓬島瑤台) in the middle of the Sea of Plenitude (Fuhai 福海), by a famous painting by the Tang artist Li Sixun 李思訓. Many of the scenes of the garden were miniaturizations of magical realms associated with the universe, immortals and good fortune. Other visions were more realistic:

For example, Yongzheng had a range of living tableaux designed for the amusement of himself and his family. These included: “Crops as Plentiful as Fields” (Duojia Ruyun 多稼如雲), an island full of busy farmers played by toiling eunuchs, overseen by a pavilion from which the emperor could view their labours at leisure. There was also the Buddhist “City of Śrāvastī” (Shewei Cheng 舍衛城) and “The Stone for Respose by the Stream” (Zuoshi Linliu 坐石臨流) with its Courtyard of Universal Happiness (Tongle Yuan 同樂園),

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20 A swastika gallery (wanzhiang 萬字廊) can be found in the Central Sea of the Central and Southern Seas compound (Zhongnanhai 中南海), now the administrative centre of both state and Party rule in China. See Osvald Sirén, Gardens of China (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p.111 and plates 23 and 158.

21 The ‘gongzi’ 工字 of the Studio for Coolness in Summer (Qingxia Zhai 清夏齋); the ‘tianzi’ 田字 of Waters and Lakes in Repose (Zhanbo Ningjing 澤泊寧靜); the ‘shanzi’ 山字 of The Elevated Region of the Magical Pot (Fanghu Shengjing 方壺勝境); the ‘kouzi’ 口字 of The Pavilion Containing Autumn (Hanqu Guan 含秋館); and the irregular line (quchi 曲尺 or zhizi 之字) of the Loggia for Enjoying Verdure (Zhancong Xuan 展翠軒). Shu Mu, Shen Wei, He Naixian, eds, Yuanmingyuan ziliao ji [Collected materials on the Garden of Perfect Brightness] (Beijing: Shumu Wenxian Chuanshe, 1984), p.5.
“a township where eunuchs masquerading as storekeepers engaged the emperor and his ladies in make-believe village life.”

In this life-size drama there were fake weddings, fake courts, jails, and police, not to mention all the attendant retail opportunities, a true make-believe where money spent went straight back into the imperial coffers. The French Jesuit missionary Pierre Attiret described the scene in a famous letter written to M. d'Assaut in Paris in 1743:

... a little township in the very midst of these park grounds ... measures a quarter of a lien (one kilometer) on each side, and has gates at the four points of the compass, towers, walls with crenellated parapets, it has its streets, squares and temples, its halls, shops, courts of law and palaces, and even a harbour. In a word, everything to be found in the capital one may find here in little ... . Perhaps you ask what purpose this serves? The chief motive has been to create for the emperor a condensed picture of the bustling life in a great city where he wishes to see this.

Attiret then describes how the eunuchs play various roles in this make-believe township: some act the part of merchants, others of artisans, soldiers, officers, porters, coolies with baskets and barrows, and so on. Boats put into the harbour and unload their cargoes; the goods are distributed among the various shops and are loudly cried by the tradesmen. There is squabbling and fighting just as there is in the markets of a real city.

Nor are the thieves forgotten at these performances. Their noble rôles are entrusted to some of the most accomplished eunuchs, who act their parts brilliantly. If they are caught in the act they are publicly shamed and punished, bastinadoed or exiled, according to the extent of the theft; but if they swindle and steal successfully they get the laughter on their side and reap applause.—The emperor always buys a good deal on these occasions, and you may be sure that nothing is sold cheaply to him. But the ladies and eunuchs themselves also make purchases. This commerce would not offer such a piquant interest and provoke so much noisy fun if it had no foundation in reality.

This Suzhou Street, or 'shopping mall' (Maimaijie 貿貿街) as it was called, was the latest imperial reconstruction of a southern Chinese township. Originally, in Haidian 海淀 just south of the gar-

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22 Ibid., p.4.

**Figures 13 & 14**

The Stone for Repose near the Stream and the Shopping Mall from the Forty Scenes

The Shopping Mall today looking north towards the remains of the City of Sāvatī.
den, the Kangxi Emperor had built such an area for his Changchun Yuan, and another was created by Qianlong inside the northern entrance of the Qingyi Yuan 清漪園 (later the Yihe Yuan 頤和園).\textsuperscript{26}

Yet it was during the reign of Yongzheng's son, the Qianlong Emperor (r.1736–95), that the garden was developed to its full splendour with the completion of the original Yuan Ming Yuan in 1744 and the addition of two other gardens, the Changchun Yuan (completed in 1751) and the Qichun Yuan 綺春園 (completed in 1772).\textsuperscript{27} They covered an area of some 347 hectares (857 acres) and together with the other imperial gardens in the area became known as "The Three Mountains and Five Gardens" (Sanshan Wuyuan 三山五園).\textsuperscript{28}

After ascending the throne Qianlong embarked on a number of Tours of the South, \textit{nanxun}南巡, to inspect his imperial domains, during which he visited some of the most famous scenic spots and gardens in the empire, in particular the Jiangnan 江南 district, the home of literati culture. Subsequently, back in Peking, like Kangxi before him, he decided to recreate those southern wonders in his northern imperial pleasance. Returning from his travels with scroll paintings of the gardens he admired he had his builders reproduce them to scale.\textsuperscript{29}

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\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} The only extant ‘Suzhou Street’ in the former imperial pleasance district of Peking is the one in the Yihe Yuan, reconstructed in the 1980s and 90s in imitation of the street built by Qianlong in the mid-eighteenth century. See Xu Fengtong, \textit{Yibeyuan Suzhoujie [The Suzhou Street in the Yihe Yuan]} (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1993), pp.6–7.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Beijing lishi ditu ji}, pp.53–4.

\textsuperscript{28} The Three Mountains were the Fragrant Hills, Longevity Mountain and Jade Source Mountain (Xiangshan 香山, Wanshoushan 萬壽山 and Yuquanshan 玉泉山). The Five Gardens were the three that comprised the Yuan Ming Yuan as well as Jingyi Yuan 靜宜園 at the Fragrant Hills and Qingyi Yuan at Longevity Mountain. In imperial documents the area was often simply referred to as Dianyuan 澹園—‘The Gardens in Haidian’.

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\textbf{Figure 15}  \textit{Overview of the Yuan Ming Yuan, Changchun Yuan and Qichun Yuan, c.1860 (Hou Renzhi, ed., Beijing lishi ditu ji, pp.53–4)}
These reproductions—over forty in number—were to include imitations of scenes from Hangzhou, a former imperial capital and a city of renown that had never recovered from the Qing invasion. Still famous for its lakeside beauty, Qianlong had many of its choice scenes (jing 景) duplicated in his own palaces. They included: The Autumn Moon on Still Waters (Pinghu Qiuyue 平湖秋月); Reflection of the Moon in Three Ponds (Santan Yinyue 三潭印月); Sunset at the Leifeng Pagoda (Leifeng Xizhao 雷峰夕照); Watching the Fish in the Flower Harbour (Huagang Guanyu 花港觀魚); and Winds in the Lotuses in the Serpentine Courtyard (Quyuan Fenghe 曲院風荷). The Anlan Garden 安蘭園 of the Chen Family 陳氏 in Haining 海寧 (at the Siyi Shuwu 四宜書屋); the Tianyi Ge 天一閣 Library (named Wenyuan Ge 文淵閣) of the Fan Family 范氏 in Ningbo; and the Lion Garden (Shizi Lin 獅子林) from Suzhou were also transposed to the Yuan Ming Yuan. It was as if by recreating landscapes replete with literary history that Qianlong, the universal emperor, could subsume the culture and sensibility they symbolised. It was also by thus expanding the syncretic garden palace, combining elements of Ming literati gardens with imperial affluence, that Qianlong created one of the abiding “mythic gardens” of Chinese history that despite its heterogenous origins has, as the twentieth-century has progressed, become the ne plus ultra of the “Chinese garden,” “or at least a milestone in the historical development of the garden.”

The discrete scenes and pavilions were linked by numerous bridges, over a thousand of them. They came in many shapes—straight, crooked, zigzag and humped, and were made of stone, brick and wood. Some were punctuated by little teahouses, others were interrupted by summerhouses built for overlooking the lakes or watching the fish that filled the streams and ponds.

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**Figures 16 & 17**

*Heavenly Light Above and Below from the Forty Scenes, showing connecting bridges*

Looking towards *Heavenly Light Above and Below from the south today:* The bell perch on a crudely fashioned earthen causeway that bisects the Posterior Lake (Houhu) for the convenience of local fishermen.
Figure 18
The sole surviving original bridge in the gardens as seen looking south towards the reconstructed Pavilion for Surveying the Azure (Jianbi Ting 萬碧亭) in the Qichun Yuan (now the Wanchun Yuan)*

Figure 19
The Européanoiserie pavilion at the centre of The Maze designed by the Jesuits for the Qianlong Emperor (photograph by Ernst Ohlmer c. 1875, reprinted in Régine Thiriet, "Les Palais européens du Yuanmingyuan à travers la photographie. 1860-1940," Arts Asiatiques, Tome XLV-1990, p. 90)

The eighteenth century was also a time when Jesuit missionaries continued to find favour at the Chinese Court. In their efforts to ingratiate themselves with the imperial family and the ruling élite of the empire they offered their services as astronomers, designers, artists and artisans. The array of ingeneous Western talents that they displayed enthralled Qianlong and he pressed a contingent of Jesuits into his service. When one of their number, Giuseppe Castiglione, showed him pictures of palaces and fountains from France and Italy Qianlong ordered copies to be built in the Yuan Ming Yuan, just as he had instructed his engineers to reproduce follies inspired by sites in the south of China.

Figure 20
A copperplate engraving by the Jesuit designers of The Maze (Wanhuazhen 萬花陣)
Thus, starting in 1747, Qianlong had his court Jesuits design a series of mock-roccoco structures and fountains in the north-east corner of the Garden of Prolonged Spring (Changchun Yuan), and over the following decades the Italian and French missionaries oversaw the construction of a corridor of Western Palaces, the Xiyang lou 西洋楼.

It was in these Western-style buildings that the imperial desire to bring all of the world, both Chinese and barbarian, within his grasp reached its apogee. It was also here that the first extended attempt was made to amalgamate Chinese and Western architectural motifs in a style of Européanoiserie.  

The Garden of Perfect Brightness, "the museum of Qianlong's travels" as the architectural historian Charles Moore has called it, was part of the emperor's grandiose efforts to prove himself and his dynasty a cultivated and worthy inheritor, not to mention reinvigorator, of the high culture of previous dynasties. Along with his ambitious empire-building—his expansion of the territory under Qing rule to include the New Domains (Xinjiang 新疆, or Turkestan) in the West and the pacification of Mongolia and Tibet—and his cultural projects like the encyclopaedia of Chinese writings and compilations of histories, Qianlong's massive building plans marked the final high-point in Chinese imperial history. But his was a heavy hand, and for all its majesty it still weighed ponderously, and often quite artlessly, on all that it touched.
Figure 24
A reconstruction of the Western Palaces of the Changchun Yuan (illustration accompanying Jin Yufeng, "Yuanmingyuan Xiyang lou pingxi" [A critical discussion of the Western Palaces in the Garden of Perfect Brightness], Yuanmingyuan xuekan 3 (1984): 22-3)

Figures 25 & 26
A model of the Palace of the Calm Sea in a display case at the site*
The restored western façade of the Palace of the Calm Sea today*
In 1742, his seventh year as emperor, Qianlong wrote of the gardens that “Indeed this is a realm in which heavenly treasures and earthly wonders are gathered. There has never been any imperial pleasure-ground that can surpass it.” Little wonder, then, that in a poem about the Yuan Ming Yuan, the late-Qing writer Wang Kaiyun (1833–1916), when contemplating the remains of the gardens, could claim that “The very heavens and earth were transported to rest in miniature within the embrace of our Lord.”

34 賦天寶地靈之區。帝王遊處之地，

35 移天歸地在君懷。
After Qianlong's demise, the gardens were constantly expanded and refined by his successors. The cost of the continued building, the maintenance of the grounds and repairs to the painted wooded pavilions, some three thousand structures in all, as well as the expense of the veritable army of eunuch guards, workers, gardeners and the troops stationed in an encircling series of hamlets around the perimeter of the gardens, was enormous. According to present official estimates, the upkeep of the gardens at the time cost the approximate equivalent of US$800,000 a year, or some US$2.5 billion during its one-and-a-half centuries in existence.\(^{36}\)

**The Ages of Destruction**

Long before the devastation launched by the British and French in 1860, there were indications that, like the Qing empire itself, the Garden of Perfect Brightness was beginning to show its age.

Even in the latter years of the Qianlong Emperor's reign there were signs that sections of the gardens were far from perfectly maintained. Just two years after Lord Macartney's mission to China in 1893, when gifts from the British Crown were presented to the Court and installed at the Yuan Ming Yuan, and only a few months after a Dutch embassy was fêted there, the considerable lengths of copper piping engineered by the Jesuits to allow for the spectacular waterworks at The Palace of the Calm Sea (Haiyan Tang 海晏堂) of the Western Palaces were dismantled for redeployment.\(^{37}\) The pumps installed by the Jesuits themselves had long since fallen into disrepair, and following the expulsion of the missionaries there were none who knew how to fix them. Water pressure for the fountains could only be maintained by the prodigious effort of bucket-bearing eunuchs who began filling up the