




## A Three Dimensional Mandala in Pule Temple (Chengde,China) and an Emperor's Tantric Buddhist Belief

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### *[Abstract]*

Pule Temple, one of a series of temples under the patronage of the Qing court (1644–1911), is unique in holding a giant, three-dimensional mandala as the only object in the main hall, distinguishing this temple from all others in China. This mandala is identified as a cakrasamvara Tantric Buddhist mandala, a visualized deity system and aid for initiation rituals and meditation. The object of this study is to introduce the mandala and to investigate the religious information communicated by the aesthetic, historical, and socio-political messages conveyed by this mandala and the temple which houses it. This study shows the Pule Temple mandala is proof of the Buddhist belief of Emperor Qianlong, who kept his devotion to Tibetan Buddhism rather private. The indicative elements in Pule temple, including the location, layout, decoration, and the inscriptions on the stele, illustrate the fusion of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in the mind of the Manchu ruler.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Buddhism, Mandala, Pule Temple, Chengde City, Emperor Qianlong, Tantric Buddhist Belief

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## Introduction

When Swedish adventurer Sven Hedin visited Pule Temple in Chengde, China in 1930, he recorded in his journal that an “unknown shrine or something” (Hedin, 1933) was located at the very center of the main building. This “unknown shrine” depicted in Hedin’s diary is the subject of this study. Pule Temple is one of an array of Buddhist temples built by the Qing court from the 17th to 18th century in Chengde city, the secondary capital of the Qing Empire (1644–1910 CE). Please see Fig. 1 for the location of Chengde city, which was the capital of Jehol province during Qing dynasty. Luckily, despite a series of wars from the 1930s to 1940s, and a series of revolutions since 1949, including the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the temple and the shrine-like object have survived without much damage. Lately, some scholars (Zhao, 2008; K. Li, 1984; J. Li, 2008; Shi & Kooij, 2003) have identified the wooden structure which puzzled Hedin as a Buddhist mandala.

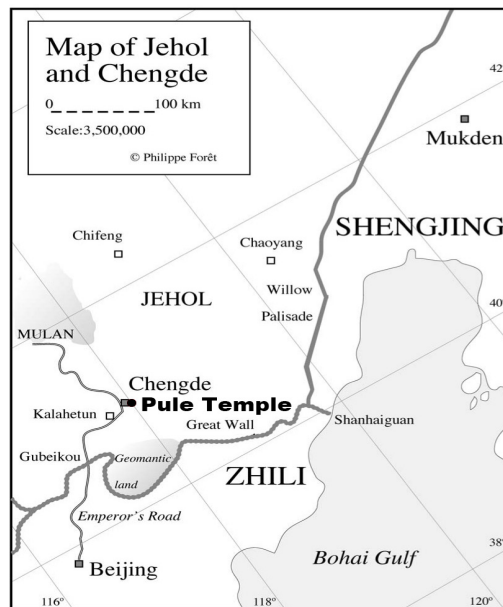


Figure 1. The location of Chengde city. Illustrated in Philippe Forêt: *Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise*, 2000, p. vi, *Map of Jehol and Chengde*.

This paper aims to analyze the details and visual surroundings of Pule Temple and the mandala, to reveal the historical, political, and geographical background directly linked to the visual context.

To avoid confusion, the mandala referred to in this study specifically the wooden structure inside Xuguang Pavilion, although the complex composed of Xuguang Pavilion and its base is also a giant mandala itself. Pending further specification, the ‘Pule Temple mandala’ will refer to the wooden structure inside the building, not the building itself.

Existing academic literature on Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist art tend to focus on materials and objects from relatively early periods, but can overlook the importance of more recent Buddhist artifacts. Therefore, this investigation aims to introduce and analyse a relatively more recent Tantric Buddhist artifact, the three-dimensional mandala in Pule Temple.

The introduction and analysis of the mandala and Pule Temple begins from the mandala in the Xuguang Pavilion, and then expands to the pavilion and the layout of Pule Temple, before further expanding to the geographic location of, and terrain around, the temple; following the sequence from micro to macro. Due to the importance of the information on the stele, a special section introduces and analyzes the content of the epigraph and the significance of it to this study.

### **Literature review**

The study of visual appearances relies mostly on existing literature about the physical characteristics of the mandala and its visual context, which enables further investigation of the mandala’s religious affiliation and relevant religious praxis. For example, *The Pule Temple Chengde*, a bilingual (English-Chinese) monograph on Pule Temple, composed collaboratively by Leiden University and the Culture Relics Bureau of Chengde (Shi & Kooij, 2003), provides critical information on the mandala and Pule Temple. This monograph primarily considers the temple

through aesthetic and archaeological perspectives, including the historical background, architecture, painting, sculpture, material techniques, and styles. Another valuable book for this study is *Ancient Architecture in Chengde* (Architectural Department of Tianjin University, 1982), which includes the architectural details of Pule Temple with detailed illustrations based on field surveys and measurements.

Some research papers published in the field of cultural relics provide details of the three-dimensional mandala. For example, Zhao Xiumei (2008) introduces the layout of Pule Temple and the features of the wooden mandala, including the size of the majority of its components. Li Jianhong (2008) lists a series of mandalas in all of the Outlying Temples in Chengde City and accurately describes the mandala in Pule Temple with a facade illustration appended. Li Keyu (1984) investigates the connection between Pule Temple and esoteric Buddhist philosophy.

Some works touch upon the religious issues related to Qing Court and Qing Emperors. In his book *Dragon Robe and Kasaya: An Investigation on the Tibetan Buddhist Culture in Qing Court* (Luo, 2005), Luo Wenhua addresses this issue through investigation of the Tibetan Buddhist art preserved in the Forbidden City, Beijing. Zhang Yuxin also investigates the entangled relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and Qing court in his book *The Qing court and Tibetan Buddhism* (Zhang, 1988), giving an account of the history of the connection between the Qing court and Tibetan Buddhism.

Another contribution to this discussion is in the biography of *Changkya Rolpe Dorje*, written by the Third *Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima* in the 18th Century, which hints at the religious practice of Emperor Qianlong. Wang Xianyun (2000) explores the connection between *Changkya Rolpe Dorje* and Emperor Qianlong. Her work also assists in revealing Emperor Qianlong's religiosity.

### **Details of the mandala and the interior of Xuguang Pavilion**

The mandala is fundamentally a cubic, palace-like, wooden structure built on a circular stone base. The mandala is impressive to people who enter the pavilion, including the researcher during the field research visits to Pule Temple. The whole structure is so vast and tall that it occupies most of the volume inside the hall, making the space between the base of the mandala and the wall of the pavilion narrow, and making the people standing in the space feel cramped. See Fig. 2 for the photograph of the wooden mandala and its pedestal. Li Jianhong depicts the size of the mandala as:

*“This wooden mandala is also one of the biggest ones in this style...The base of the wooden mandala is a circular stone platform with a diameter of 6.2 meters. The mandala is square and reaches a height of 2.1 meters. Each of the four edges is 5.09 meters long...In the middle of this mandala, the deities, a 1.05-meter high statue of Samvara stands in sexual union with Vajravarahi, facing the East. (J. Li, 2008, p. 160)”*



Figure 2. Photograph of the mandala in Xuguang Pavilion. Author, 2017

The circular stone pedestal is a “Sumeru base,” or “Xumizuo” in Chinese, which comprises of six vertical levels of round bands. The lowest band, at the bottom of the pedestal, has less relief decoration than the upper five, and seems that it may have been damaged and repaired, with some traces of the repairs still apparant. The five upper bands are vertically symmetrical, with the fourth from bottom in the center of this symmetry. The motif on the central band is of plant leaves with three circles, as a knot, at the center of each pattern. The motif on the second and the top bands, the outer bands in the symetrical structure, is of a dragon playing with a pearl in the clouds, a traditional Chinese theme representing the authority of the emperors, who were the sons of the heavens in the imperial ideology. This motif is identical to that of the ornate ceiling of Xuguang Pavilion. The motif on the third and the fifth bands, the inner bands, is of lotus petals, the most common theme of pedestals in Buddhist scupture. Vertical cracks are visible on each layer. At the top of the pedestal, along its outer edge, the wooden railing forms a circle, fencing in the structure on the top of the pedestal. The railing looks comparatively new and rough, suggesting that it may not be the original one.

The the mandala and the statues inside stand on the top of the pedestal. Directly on top of the stone pedestal, the mandala has a square wooden base, which has a protruded cruciform vajra attached to each side. A palace-like structure rises from the top of the square wooden base. Each side has a ‘gate’ above a cruciform vajra, symbolizing the entrance to the center of the palace. All four of these gates look identical. Colors and traces of paintings are visible on the gates, but the paintings are faded and illegible. Inside the gates it is thought that there was previously a cuboid structure, however now all that remains are the pillars and lintels, with no ‘walls’. On the pillars, in the area where walls would have connected to the pillars, there is no trace of paintings or colors.

On the outward facing side of each linel of this cubic structure, two rectangular pits are easily identifiable (Fig. 3), which suggests that there may have been a type of covering hanging from them, e.g. thin plates or curtains, once serving as walls. Inside the cube, another eight pillars

support a circular ceiling which, following the standard pattern of a mandala (Fig. 4), is divided into nine sections by four crossed beams (Fig. 5). All of these beams are ornamented by the continual pattern comprising of a combination of a vajra, the common symbol in Tantric Buddhism, and a “*Ruyi*”, a traditional Chinese decorative symbol with the meaning of “things happen as (one’s) will.” Six Tibetan or Sanskrit syllables are visible (but illegible) on one section of the four larger sections. A small palace-like structure rises from the central section of the top of the cubic wooden structure. The small palace can hardly be seen from the ground because, as it is so highly elevated and comparatively small, the lower part of the wooden structure blocks it from view entirely.

In the exact center of the mandala, a statue of two deities in sexual union (*yub-yum* in Tibetan) stands on a lotus-petal-shaped metal pedestal (Fig. 6) for the statue). The male deity has four faces, twelve arms, and two legs. The four faces share one hair knot on the top of the head and each of the faces has an extra eye between the eyebrows. Five skulls with leaf-shaped back plates ornament the corona of each face. The facial expression, the same on each face, is in a complex combination of some fierceness, but also with a slight smile. The necklace of this deity is made of a string of human heads. The female deity has regular limbs, and lifts her right leg around the haunch of the male deity. Her left leg almost reaches down to the top of the male deity’s right foot, but is still suspended in the air. It looks like she should be standing on something, but there is nothing under her foot. The necklace of the female deity is a string of skulls. All limbs of the two deities are ornamented with bracelets. All of the hands seem to have held something at one time, but now only the left hand of the female deity has a skull-cup with swirling nectar in it. It seems that the whole statue has become disconnected from the pedestal, as the union of figures now has to be kept upright by a steel string anchored onto the wooden structure. Therefore, it is not certain if the metal pedestal under the statue is the original or a replacement.



Figure 3 The pits on the beam of the mandala.

Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, *Pule Temple Chengde*, 2003, p151, Fig.20

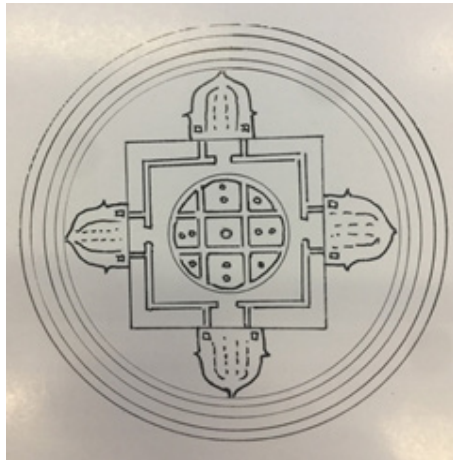


Figure 4 The pattern of the inner ceiling of the mandala. Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, *Pule Temple Chengde*, 2003, p 100 Fig. 66





Figure 5 The photograph of the inner ceiling of the mandala. Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, Pule Temple Chengde, 2003, p152, Fig.22



Figure 6 The statue at the center of the three-dimensional mandala. Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, Pule Temple Chengde, 2003, p 101, Fig. 67

The ceiling of the pavilion is a traditional Chinese design, rich in messages about royal power. Twenty-four wooden pillars support the round domed ceiling. The highest part, also the center of the ceiling, is a complex wooden sculpture of “a single dragon playing with a pearl,” which clearly and strongly conveys the authority of the monarchy. The Chinese dragon is a mythical creature, which was a symbol of royal power. The pearl, being played with by the dragon, represents an object under the control of that power. Traditionally, such motifs would usually be “two dragons playing with a pearl,” but here there is only one. The message is clear: the power of the monarchy is the only central power. The relationship between the mandala and the dragon, on the ceiling above, is a symbol of the relationship between the power of the emperor and the power of religion: that regardless of the emperor’s own thoughts on the religion, the power of the son of the dragon, Tianzi, will always be superior to that of religion (Fig. 7).



Figure 7 The “single dragon playing with a pearl” ceiling above the mandala. Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, *Pule Temple Chengde*, 2003, P196 Fig. 21

If we project all of the elements: the round pedestal, the four gates, the round ceiling with nine compartments, and the central statue; onto a flat surface, the typical pattern of mandala tangka will emerge. See Fig. 8 for the pattern of a *cakrasamvara* tangka mandala (Huntington & Bangdel, 2003, p. 261), which is exactly what this three-dimensional mandala represents.

In summary, the whole image presented by these components is clear: the structure is a three-dimensional manifestation of a Tantric Buddhist mandala; and with the dragon motif on the ceiling above the mandala, the message is that to the emperor, the divine power must be under the surveillance and control of the political power.



Figure 8 A sample of *cakrasamvara* mandala

Inscribed and dated 1490

Opaque water color on cotton cloth

H:116.8cm W: 88cm

In the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Acquisition Fund (M.73.2.1)

Illustrated in Huntington & Bangdel, 2003, *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, p.261, plate 70

### **The stele and its context**

The stele located at the entrance of the massive base of Xuguang Pavilion is pivotal to the identification of the religious affiliation of the Pule Temple mandala. The four facets of the stele have inscriptions in Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan. The pedestal and the canopy of the stele are all made of stone and carved with dragons, the symbol of emperors' power. The inscription in Chinese indicates that the author of the text is Emperor Qianlong, and that it is also his handwriting. See Fig. 9 for the Chinese inscription.

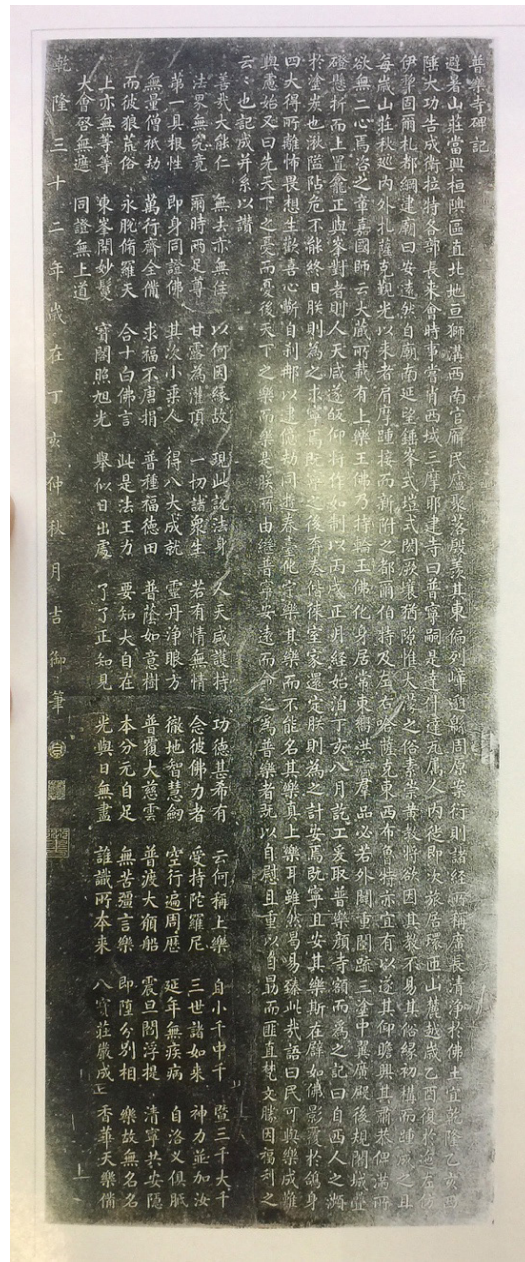


Figure 9 The Chinese inscription on the stele in Pule Temple.  
 Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, *Pule Temple Chengde*, 2003, p51 Fig. 7

In the text, Emperor Qianlong explicitly states that Pule Temple was constructed after consultation with his Buddhist preceptor *Changkya Rolpe Dorje* as follows:

*“When I consulted my preceptor Changkya Rolpe Dorje, he said that in Buddhist Canon, there recorded a cakrasamvara, who is the nirmanakaya of chakravartin, and always faces the East, to give sermons to sentient beings.”*

According to this text, the veneration of *cakrasamvara* should be the principal purpose of Pule Temple, and *cakrasamvara* is undoubtedly the protagonist in this temple. This is not surprising when we learn that *cakrasamvara* is the *yidam* of *Changkya Rolpe Dorje* and Emperor Qianlong (J. Li, 2008, p. 160; *thu'u bkyan*, 2007, p. 184). *Yidam* is the Tibetan word for “meditational deity” or “tutelary deity,” “which serves as the focus of one’s *sadhana* practice” (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 1027)000 entries totaling over a million words, this is the most comprehensive and authoritative dictionary of Buddhism ever produced in English. It is also the first to cover terms from all of the canonical Buddhist languages and traditions: Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Unlike reference works that focus on a single Buddhist language or school, The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism bridges the major Buddhist traditions to provide encyclopedic coverage of the most important terms, concepts, texts, authors, deities, schools, monasteries, and geographical sites from across the history of Buddhism. The main entries offer both a brief definition and a substantial short essay on the broader meaning and significance of the term covered. Extensive cross-references allow readers to find related terms and concepts. An appendix of Buddhist lists (for example, the four noble truths and the thirty-two marks of the Buddha. The significance of the mandala can be illustrated by the layout of the temple, as the Xuguang Pavilion is the most prominent and highest building in the temple.

This stele also includes some other important information regarding the temple, such as the purpose of its construction, the history of temples around the region, the political aims of those temples, the Qing court’s

fundamental attitude towards Mongolians' religious beliefs, the selection of the site, the meaning of the temple's name, and even Emperor Qianlong's personal instructions for administration and his understanding of Buddhism.

At the beginning of the text, Emperor Qianlong proclaims the feats of his conquest of these inner Asian regions, and states that the establishment of the temples in Chengde aims to provide the newly subjected people, mostly Mongolian, places to meet their need for daily religious veneration. The explicit statement here, however, entirely contradicts the reality in two ways: the first is that a large number of the people he mentioned in the text were Muslims; and the second is that after the temple's completion, it had never been opened for laymen and lamas, but was used exclusively for the royal family's esoteric rituals. This temple is among three temples that "had never had Lamas assigned to live in" and was under the supervision of the Imperial Household Department of the Qing court. The other two temples were the *Luohan* Halls and the *Guang'an* Temple. The first of these, the *Luohan* Hall, is for the display and veneration of the statues of 500 *Luohan* (Sanskrit: *arahrt*); and the second, the *Guang'an* Temple, is for holding the rite for Emperor Qianlong to 'take refuge in Buddhism'. In contrast, the other nine Outer Temples built in this region by the court were under the supervision of the Ministry of the Lifan Yuan, which was a department in the Qing court for the administration of outlying regions. Monks (lamas) were also dispatched to these temples by this Ministry directly, and they all had a monthly salary-like patronage from the Ministry. Hence, it can be seen that Pule Temple was the household affair of the court, which makes it very close to the emperor's private affairs.

It is not unusual for an emperor to have had a private temple or palace. The name and the text on the stele composed by Emperor Qianlong, however, suggests that the emperor was deliberately attempting to hide something. However, as the holder of absolute power, it would seem that the emperor should not need to hide his possessions. The explanation of the name and the exclusive usage of the temple lead to another

inconsistency. The literal meaning of Pule is ‘universal bliss’, originating from a famous Chinese verse “(a perfect man) would gladly be the first to bear hardships before everybody else and the last to enjoy comforts .” In relation to a monarch, this verse means that the universal happiness of his people is the priority of a good ruler. Emperor Qianlong even quotes the verse at the end of his text on the the stele. When it comes to the use of this temple, however, the emperor did not share the “universal bliss” from this temple with people, not even with the lamas. Therefore, there is only one possible answer: Emperor Qianlong tried to hide his private beliefs from the view of the people.

The stele also articulates one aspect of Emperor Qianlong’s political tenets when he quotes the verse “people can share happiness with you, but could not plan (the paths to successes) from the beginning ” from Records of the Grand Historian, a history of ancient China. In this sense, Emperor Qianlong says that his purpose is “not only for the bliss from the Buddhist scripts, but to console me and urge myself (to exert more efforts for the bliss of people)(Qianlong, 1776).”

The last part of the stele is a poem with four words in each verse, through which the emperor illustrates his comprehension of the Buddhist doctrine regarding *cakrasamvara* (e.g., “同證無上道”, meaning to get enlightened together), implying his spiritual pursuit. This part of the text is more like a prayer to Buddha from Qianlong. In this regard, the construction of this temple seems to be a very personal project for Emperor Qianlong.

It is worth also highlighting the location of the stele, as it is unique compared with other temples in this region, and most of the temples in China. Usually, the stele(s) will be located close to the entrance, as the function of the stele(s) is to provide visitors with information about the construction of the temple, such as the rationale, date, and sponsors of the construction. These messages are supposed to be seen by the visitors as soon as they enter the temple. This stele in Pule Temple, however, is in front of the main building and behind the hall for Buddhas. In light of the fact that there would be no other visitors except the royal family and the lamas chant-



ing the rituals, we can consider the content of this stele as a soliloquy of Emperor Qianlong. Therefore, the location of the stele in this temple also suggests the personal nature of this temple to Qianlong.

In summary, the stele provides detailed information for the interpretation of the mandala and the temple. First and most significantly, it helps to identify the main deity in this temple as *cakrasamvara*. The text also clearly shows the date of the start and completion of this temple's construction as from the first month of 1766 to the eighth month of 1767. Through analysis of the inconsistencies between the text and the usage of this temple, it can be inferred that the mandala and the temple pertain to Emperor Qianlong's own beliefs. Another important message learned from the stele is that the emperor was trying to hide something from the public, specifically his own religious piety to Tibetan Buddhism.

### **The *Xuguang Pavilion* and the layout of Pule Temple**



Figure 10 The photograph of the complex of Xuguang Pavilion and its base. Author, 2017

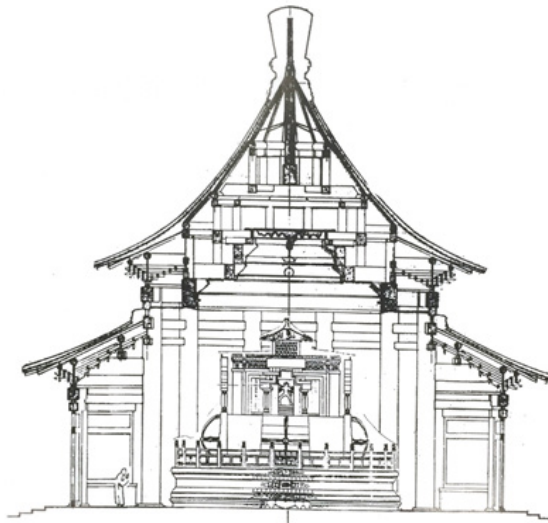


Figure 11 The structure of Xuguang Pavilion.  
Illustrated in Shi & Kooij, *Pule Temple Chengde*, 2003, P128

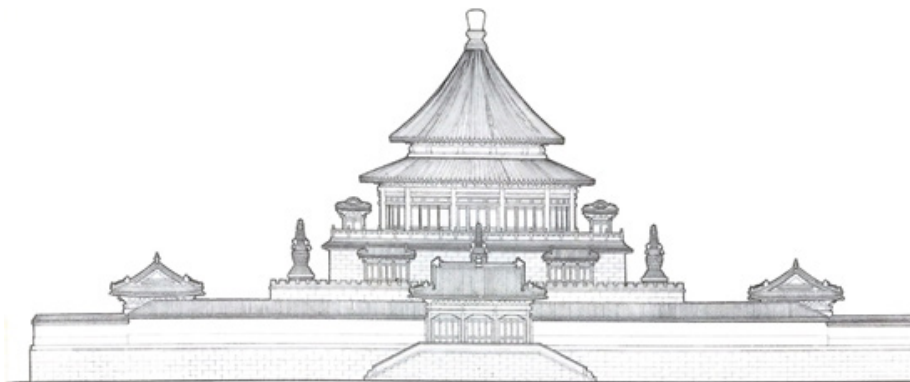


Figure 12 The façade of Xuguang Pavilion and its base. Illustrated in  
Architectural Department of Tianjin University, *Ancient Architecture in  
Chengde*, p.281, Fig.401

According to Li Keyu's description (Li, 1984, p. 100), the perimeter of the first floor was once covered and surrounded by sixty-eight rooms. These rooms were prepared for monks as a temporary residence during some rituals. However, now only the base and some stone bases of pillars remain.

Four shrine-like niches open in the walls, with one on each side. Three of these hold statues of fierce deities, and the Western niche holds the stairs to the second floor. A small pavilion holding the stele stands in front of the entrance to the stairs. On the second level, eight pagodas surround the wall of the third level. The colors of pagodas to the East, South, West, and North are black, yellow, purple and blue respectively. The pagodas at each corner are all white. All of these pagodas are identically shaped and are made of glazed ceramic. The third floor is square, surrounded by sixty-seven stone columns sculpted with Chinese style dragons, the symbol of the emperor's power and authority. The wooden building, *Xuguang* Pavilion, is located at the center of this highest floor.

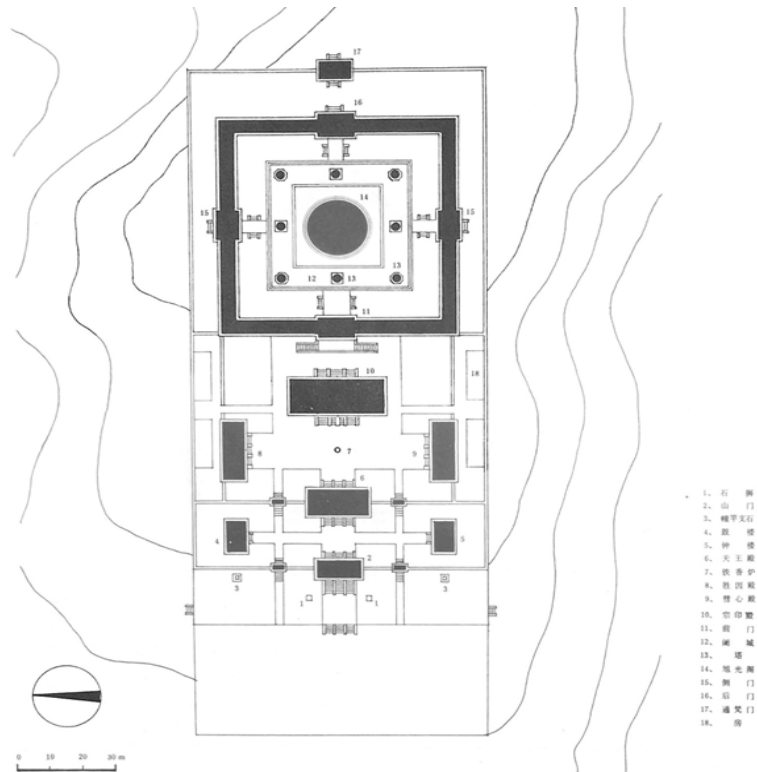


Figure 13 The layout of Pule Temple. Illustrated in Architectural Department of Tianjin University, Ancient Architecture in Chengde, p.276, Fig.391

See Fig. 13 for the layout of Pule Temple. The entrance of the temple faces West, and the gate of *Xuguang* Pavilion faces East, which is unusual for temples in China, especially among royal temples, most of which have their gate and main hall facing South. South-facing entrances is seen as an orthodox design for formal buildings, and specifically for royal buildings.

The arrangement of the lower part from the main gate to the *Zongyin* Hall follows the typical layout of a Chinese temple. Behind the entrance is a typical *Tianwang* Dian, the layout of which can be found in most Chinese Buddhist temples: two huge standing *Tianwang* (the Heavenly Guardian Kings) statues sit at each side, and a statue of “The Smiling Buddha,” the *maitreya* Buddha, at the center facing the people walking in. Walking to the back of “The Smiling Buddha,” visitors can see a statue of *Weituo* with a long weapon, a vajra, leaning on his right shoulder, and holding its lower end with his right hand. The main gate, the Drum Tower, the Bell Tower, and the *Tianwang* Hall together constitute the first courtyard.

The *Tianwang* Hall, *Zongyin* Hall, the *Huili* Hall, and the *Shenyin* Hall surround the second courtyard. *Zongyin* Hall is parallel to *Tianwang* Hall, and the other two are side halls. The principle statues in *Zongyin* Hall are the *trikala* Buddhas, *Sakyamuni* flanked by “*Amitabha*, the Buddha of Long Life”, and “*Bhaisajyaguru*, the Medicine Buddha (Shi & Kooij, 2003, p. 167),” accompanied by eight Bodhisattvas, namely “*Sarvanivaranaviskambhin*, *Samantabhadra*, *Vajrapani*, *Manjusri*, *Avalokitesvara*, *Maitreya*, *Ksitigarbha*, and *Akasagarbha* (Shi & Kooij, 2003, p. 83).” The *Huili* Hall houses three wrathful guardian deities, “a *hayagriva*, a ferocious form of *vajrapani* and a three-headed *mahakala*.” Likewise, the *Shenyin* Hall houses “a six-armed *mahakala*, a *vajrapani*, and another three-headed manifestation of *mahakala*” (Shi & Kooij, 2003, p. 173). These wrathful images are more commonly seen in Tibetan Buddhist temples.

When it comes to the architectural style, Zhao Xiumei (Zhao, 2008, p. 43) suggests that the layout of Pule Temple is a combination of two architectural styles: the front section follows the traditional layout of

Chinese temples, and the back section is in the Tibetan. However, it could be considered that the so-called Tibetan part is more Chinese than Tibetan style, but uses Tibetan content within a Chinese style. Its combination of Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese architectural style, makes this temple more intriguing. The architectural style closest to *Xuguang* Pavilion is that of the *Tian Tan*, or the Temple of Heaven, which was built in the *Ming* dynasty and restored in the *Qing* dynasty, and is not related to Tibetan architecture.

In conclusion, the layout of the temple and the supreme position of the *Xuguang* Pavilion suggests the significance of the deities and the mandala which it houses. This significance lies in the fact that the deities and the mandala are placed at the highest point, and within the most prominent building, of the temple. The construction of this temple, in this manner, was very likely to honor the deities inside the mandala. What is more, the form of the mandala is given high status within this temple, as both the principal object and the building housing it follow this form. Together with the statues in the halls, the overall arrangement explicitly illustrates that the design of Pule Temple combines traditional Chinese style and Tibetan elements. The Chinese style is evident, and the Tibetan elements are hidden by the Chinese style in a way which seems secretive. From the outside of the temple, for example, from a nearby hill, the temple looks like traditional Chinese architecture. This may be why the locals call it “Round Pavilion” as from outside the architecture appears like a traditional round pavilion, which is normally used for temporarily rest. Considering that, during the *Qing* dynasty, ordinary people would not have been able to enter the complex, and would only have seen it from outside; the inconsistency of styles can be interpreted as Emperor Qianlong aiming to conceal his piety to Tibetan Buddhism from public view.

### **The location of Pule Temple and the idea of *Yin-Yang***

The site of Pule Temple among the Mountain Resort and its Outlying Temples is, in the eyes of Philippe Forêt in his book *Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise* (Forêt, 2000), the result of elaborate design. “A straight axis runs from *Qingchui* peak to Jinshan temple through

the very center of the main hall of *Pule* temple”, depicted Forêt (2000, p. 52). The *Qingchui* peak is a pillar-shaped rock, which is Forêt believes to be the symbol of Sumeru, representing heaven. *Jinshan* Temple is located beside a lake inside the Mountain Resorts and is seen as the symbol of Earth.

It is suggested that there is also a sort of geographic consideration by the Emperor Qianlong. In Chinese tradition, a mountain is considered as *yang*, and lower water (lake, river) is considered to be *yin*. If Forêt is right that the site of Pule Temple is precisely in the middle of the axis connecting *Qingchui* peak and *Jinshan* Temple, then Pule Temple can also be interpreted as located at the median point of *yin* and *yang*. A significant feature of Pule Temple is that its main gate faces West whereas the main building faces East, which is quite unusual among Chinese Buddhist temples, especially imperial ones, for which both main gates and buildings would generally face south. Similarly, some Chinese scholars also believe that the site of Pule Temple has some connection with *Qingchui* peak, a phallic-shaped symbol of *yang* (K. Li, 1984; J. Li, 2008b). Li Jianhong (2008, p.158) highlights that Qianlong and his Tantric Buddhist master believed that the location exactly matched the *Mahesvara*'s sanctuary depicted in the scriptures, which could be the real reason for choosing the site for the construction of the giant mandala. See Fig. 14 for the alignment of *Qingchui* peak and Pule Temple.

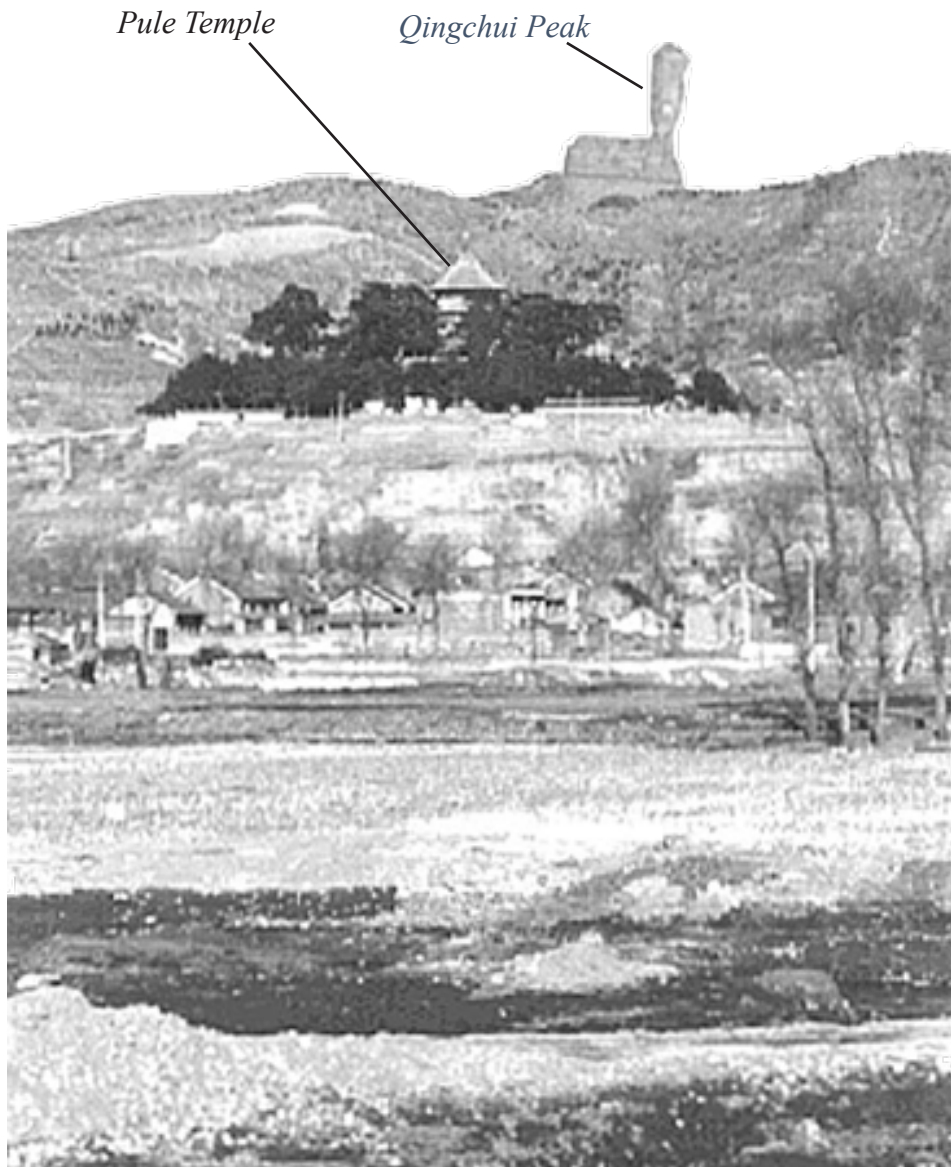


Figure 14 The alignment of Pule temple and Qingchui peak. Philippe Forêt. Illustrated in Philippe Forêt, *Mapping Chengde: The Qing Landscape Enterprise*, 2000, p.70, Fig. 26

The concept of *yin-yang* pertains not only to the site selection of Pule Temple but also to a specific object, an iron incense burner noticed by Li Keyu and the team from Leiden University and Chengde Cultural Relics Bureau (Li, 1984, p. 98; Shi & Kooij, 2003, p. 75). During the field research for this study, a construction fence encircled the incense burner, preventing visitors from getting close. Luckily, the incense burner was still visible. See Fig. 15 for the view of the incense burner. Unlike those at other temples, this incense burner does not have inscriptions, but instead has a set of the *Bagua*, the Eight Diagrams<sup>1</sup>, which represent the various possible combinations of *yin* and *yang*. This is unusual in Buddhist temples, as the Eight Diagrams are part of the symbol system of Daoism.



Figure 15 The incense burner in Pule Temple. Author, 2017

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<sup>1</sup> It is “八卦” in Chinese.



Forêt's introduction of the concept of *yin-yang* into the analysis of the location of Pule Temple makes more sense when we realize that the statue of the main deities, the *cakrasamvara* and his consort, represents the unification of *yin* and *yang*. In this sense, the function of this temple, in the mind of the designer; *Changkya Rolpe Dorje*, and the user; Emperor Qianlong, might pertain to the Daoist concept of *yin* and *yang*. Therefore, the construction and layout of this temple also reflect the melding of different religious ideas in the mindset of Emperor Qianlong.

In summary, several elements, including the subtle relationship between Pule Temple and *Qingchui* peak, the incense burner with the Eight Diagrams suggest the in-depth involvement of Daoist thought in the complex design of this temple.

### **The Pule Temple Mandala and Emperor Qianlong's Tantric Buddhist Belief**

Qianlong (1711-1799 C.E., r. 1736-1795 C.E.) is well-known as a “Confucian moralist-monarch,” a warrior regarding his encouragement of “tough military virtues in his fellow Manchus,” and even a “hunter, promoting the hardy ideals of the steppe among Mongolian princes (Farquhar, 1978, p. 5). Farquhar adds another facet to the depiction of Qianlong—the “Emperor as Bodhisattva” (Farquhar, 1978, p. 5), suggesting Qianlong's efforts and achievements in the religious realm.

According to the inscription on the Pule Temple Stele, it is confirmed that the wooden mandala is a *cakrasamvara* one. *Cakrasamvara* is believed to be the *Yidam*<sup>2</sup> of *Changkya Rolpe Dorje* and Emperor Qianlong (J. Li, 2008a, p. 160). In the official documents of the Qing court, the religious practice of Qianlong was rarely directly mentioned. However, in the biography of *Changkya Rolpe Dorje*, Qianlong's preceptor, there are more clues about Qianlong's practice. The biography records the procedure of Qianlong's request to learn Buddhist Dharma from *Changkya* in the initiation rituals (*thu'u bkyan*, 2007). In 1745 C.E., Qianlong summoned *Changkya* to confer on him the first Tantric initiation into the *cakrasamvara* Tantra. "The emperor continued to refine his practice through daily study and meditation throughout his life and received much more initiations, into the *Vajrayogini* Tantra and others, and instruction in the graduated path (*lam-rim*) and *Tsongkhapa*'s works on *MĀdhyamika* (Berger, 2003, p. 5)." From then on, on the tenth day of every month the emperor would routinely perform the rituals and practice in relation to the mandala (*thu'u bkyan*, 2007).

Other studies also infer that Emperor Qianlong was a pious Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. Lo Chung-chan holds that the layout and display in Fanhua Lou, the only surviving Buddhist building in the Forbidden City from a total of nine built in Qianlong's reign, is testimony to the emperor's strong religious beliefs and expertise in Tibetan Buddhism (C. Lo, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> *Yidam* is the Tibetan word for "meditational deity" or "tutelary deity", "who serves as the focus of one's *sadhana* practice (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 1027)000 entries totaling over a million words, this is the most comprehensive and authoritative dictionary of Buddhism ever produced in English. It is also the first to cover terms from all of the canonical Buddhist languages and traditions: Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Unlike reference works that focus on a single Buddhist language or school, The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism bridges the major Buddhist traditions to provide encyclopedic coverage of the most important terms, concepts, texts, authors, deities, schools, monasteries, and geographical sites from across the history of Buddhism. The main entries offer both a brief definition and a substantial short essay on the broader meaning and significance of the term covered. Extensive cross-references allow readers to find related terms and concepts. An appendix of Buddhist lists (for example, the four noble truths and the thirty-two marks of the Buddha" (Buswell; Lopez: 2013, p1027).

The display of Buddhist statues and decorations in Fanhua Lou pavilion, as well its private usage for Qianlong, suggest that the emperor clearly understood the steps of the practices in the Gulupya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. AN Haiyan further explores the theory that Qianlong was an esoteric Buddhist practitioner by investigating the style and material of a guide book for a secret yoga practice, *Samadhi of Completion*<sup>3</sup>, a pictorial guide written in both Tibetan and Chinese that is believed to have been compiled during Qianlong's reign (An, 2015). Lo (2008) and An (2015) take the tomb of Qianlong as an instance of his personal devotion to esoteric Buddhism, as the design and decoration of the tomb follow the decorative style of a Tantric Buddhist stupa. What is more, the whole underground palace is designed to be a mandala, wherein the emperor's coffin is located at the very heart of the mandala. The metaphor in this design is evident (Lo, 2008, p. 446).

It is essential to point out that in public, Qianlong was rather discreet about his personal religious beliefs, as there are barely any documents on this topic among the files of the Qing courts. This could, however, antithetically illustrate his serious focus on his praxis by confining it to his private realm, instead of presenting it to the public. Two rationales may help to understand this unusual characteristic of the emperor. One is that Qianlong's praxis belongs to an esoteric form of Buddhism, which is known as a "secret" tradition. David B. Gray highlights the specific discipline for the *cakrasamvara* Tantra practitioners: "according to chapter twenty-seven of the *cakrasamvara* Tantra, one should even hide one's identity as an initiated adept, which is signified by the five insignias that one must keep on one's person (Gray & Yarnall, 2007)." Another rationale may come from the lessons of the Yuan dynasty. The Yuan emperors, in the same situation as the Qings having taken the throne from the Han people, devoted themselves to Tibetan Buddhism in a fanfare of publicity, which resulted in enormous negative consequences for the society (at least among the Han intellectuals). Qianlong seems to have taken the opposite route from the Yuan emperors.

<sup>3</sup> In Chinese it is 《究竟定》.

## Conclusion

The visual contexts of the “shrine-like object”, including the texts on the stele, confirm that the object is a Tibetan Buddhist mandala; specifically a *cakrasamvara* mandala built under the patronage of Emperor Qianlong between 1766 and 1767. The inscription on the stele, written by Emperor Qianlong, discloses the monarch’s political aims: the pacification of the Mongolian community, and his spiritual pursuits: attaining enlightenment with other beings. The spiritual quest of the emperor, however, is kept entirely private, as shown by the inconsistency between the Chinese outside and the Tibetan inside of the temple. This inconsistency may reflect the duality of the religious beliefs.

There are three levels of duality when considering the mandala and *Pule Temple*. The first inconsistency, or uniqueness, is that, from the outside (the perspective of the general public), the temple appears to be Chinese architecture, but its internal content is exclusively Tibetan Buddhist. The second point is the inconsistency between Emperor Qianlong’s words (building the temple for the happiness of people) and his practice (using the temple exclusively for himself) regarding the reason for the temple’s construction; The third inconsistency is that between the emperor’s political utilitarianism and his religious enthusiasm, although these two characteristics are not necessarily contradictory. These seeming dualities show that the emperor attempted to hide his religious piety from the public.

All of these investigations show Qianlong’s piety to Tibetan Buddhism. It is therefore not difficult to conclude that there is a strong causal relationship between Qianlong’s religious praxis and the building of *Pule Temple* and the huge wooden mandala. The complexity of the temple’s architecture could be understood as a devotion to the *cakrasamvara*, the yidam of both Emperor Qianlong and his preceptor *Changkya Rolpe Dorje*. In this regard, the paradox of Qianlong’s words on the stele and the later usage of the temple can be understood: the temple complex was built more for the emperor’s personal belief than for the political appeasement of the Mongolian and Tibetan communities. Consequently, it sounds more reason-

able that the temple serves only the ritual functions of the imperial court, without sharing the ‘bliss’ with devotees, as presented on the stele.

The geographical information of the location, together with the statue and other visual messages, such as the Eight Diagrams on the incense burner, suggest that the *yin-yang* concept of Daoist thought was also involved in the design and the religious thought pertaining to this mandala and temple. Hence, it is reasonable to surmise that within Emperor Qianlong’s own religious beliefs, the concept of *yin* and *yang* also played an important role.

In this respect, Emperor Qianlong seemed to have already solved the three levels of apparent duality by simultaneously using the non-duality embodied in the *cakrasamvara* practice and the balance of *yin* and *yang*. The *Sanjiao*, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, in this sense, had already been integrated in the emperor’s thought and are reflected by this mandala and the temple which houses it.

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