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Chapter 5 The Refined Representations of China

5.1 An examination of the representation of Chinese cityscape

Nieuhof was deeply impressed by Chinese cities during his journey in China, about which he wrote, “What concerns the idol temples, courts, and palaces of great lords, and other rare edifices, which are to be seen here [China], there is no city in all Asia that shows the like.”²⁷⁴ Therefore, he made many drawings representing Chinese cityscapes in the Paris manuscript and they often consisted of city gate, city wall, pagoda, and so forth. However, many drawings of Chinese cityscapes and landscapes have only the most rudimentary preliminary depictions in pencil.

The cityscape of Canton is a good example. The Dutch envoys were required to stay in Canton for about six months while awaiting an official response to their request to visit the Chinese emperor. During this time, they were frequently invited by and generously treated by Chinese officials in Canton.²⁷⁵ Obviously, Nieuhof would have had more than enough opportunity to observe this city and its people, which is probably why he describes it in greater detail than he does any other.²⁷⁶ He may have drawn some of his information about the city’s topography and history from Martini’s *Novus Atlas Sinensis*, but his detailed account of the appearance of the city is apparently based on an eyewitness observation. Here I quote some of his descriptions of Canton in the printed book:

²⁷⁴ Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China*, 37.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 36–47.

For three miles upon this river (*Ta*) is the city of Canton walled in, and some places adorned with rich and populous suburbs. . . . On the water side the city is defended with two rows of high and thick walls, which are strengthened with bulwarks, watchtowers, and other forts; and beside these works there are two other strong water castles, which being built in the middle of the river, render this city invincible . . . the city is likewise defended and surrounded on the land side with a strong wall, and five strong castles, whereof some are within the walls, and others without upon the tops of steep hills . . . what concerns the idol temples, courts, and palaces of great lords, and other rare edifices, which are to be seen here, there is no city in all Asia that shows the like.²⁷⁷

This comprehensive description suggests that Nieuwhof was rather familiar with the city and he must have been to many places of Canton. Many details described in the text have been visualized in the corresponding drawing (see figure 4.27). As shown in this drawing, the city is located on the riverbank and surrounded with populous suburbs; furthermore, most of the extraordinary buildings can be easily discovered and identified, for instance, the castles built on the top of steep hills, the city wall, the watchtower and the idol temple. The foreground is taken up by water, on which we can see various Chinese boats. In respect to the process by which this cityscape was rendered, it is noteworthy that several horizontal lines have been drawn in chalk and pencil at the place where the silhouette of the

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 36–37.

town appears. As a preliminary sketch for the final pen depiction, these lines make a horizontal division in the composition of the cityscape. That is to say, they are used for settling the composition, prior to the application of the depiction in pen and the watercolour. With this compositional arrangement, the city lies next to a wide body of water and the city wall stretches over the image, dividing the water in the foreground from the settlements and mountains in the background. Accordingly, the portrait of the city is mainly a profile viewed from afar across an expanse of water and shows not only the profile of the city and its distinctive skyline, but also records its topographical features. This is understandable because the route taken by the Dutch embassy from Canton to Peking was mainly by river and along the Grand Canal, and consequently, most of the cities along their way were located on the water.²⁷⁸

But it is quite a complicated situation for many other cityscapes, in which the preliminary depiction in pencil and chalk is very rough. As already noted in the discussion of the cityscape of Nan'an, the refinement in pen and watercolor has quite a different intention from the preliminary sketch in pencil and chalk. In most cases, the preliminary depiction in pencil and chalk is generic and unspecific and the cityscapes are revealed mainly in pen and watercolour. The drawing in folio 130 (fig. 5.1) offers a typical example showing how the preliminary depiction in pencil and chalk and later refinement in pen and watercolour make a cityscape. A curved line in chalk is visible in the foreground and this was later rendered in pen and

²⁷⁸ The Grand Canal, also known as the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal (京杭大运河), is the longest ancient canal or artificial river in the world. Beginning in Beijing, it passes through Tianjin and the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang to the city of Hangzhou. The oldest parts of the canal date back to the fifth century BC. The total length of the Grand Canal is roughly 1,770 km (1,114 miles). See Yao Hanyuan, *A History of the Grand Canal* (京杭运河史) (Beijing: China Water & Power Press, 1998).

watercolour as a small mound. From the point where the trees appear in the middle distance another horizontal line in chalk is weakly sketched. As there is no further improvement of it in pen and watercolour, it is hard to tell what this rough line is meant to show. Moreover, a wavy line in chalk runs diagonally across the right middle ground. Its shape alone gives no clue as to what it represents, but the later depiction in pen and watercolour makes it a bridge. Similarly, a coarse circle depicted in chalk appears atop the city wall. Again, the shape is too generic to tell what it might be, although the later refinement in pen and watercolour turns it into a magnificent Chinese building with several layers of upturned eaves. Nonetheless, its shape and position do look like a watchtower atop the city wall.

This situation is very common in most of Nieuhof's cityscapes: coarse pencil-and-chalk markings atop a city wall or horizontal lines across a cityscape are too generic to offer specific information about the intention of the initial design, and the final phase mainly depends on the depiction in pen. This means Nieuhof may not have added details to sketches supposedly made on the spot in China, and so needed to recompose the cityscapes of China when he produced the Paris manuscript. This raises the question of how the representations of Chinese cityscapes are produced and to what extent they reflect the "na het leven" quality?



Figure 5.1. Drawing folio 130 in the Paris manuscript.

Regarding the “na het leven” quality of the cityscapes, we have to keep in mind why the VOC commissioned Nieuwhof to make pictures of China in “their correct shape and appearance” in the first place. Although it was supposed to be a purely diplomatic visit, the VOC still desired to discover information about the Chinese economy and the Chinese people’s way of life in order to size up China as a potential market. According to Pieter van Dam, the VOC also sent secret instructions to the ambassadors: they were to negotiate with Chinese authorities to provide naval support that could be used to fight against Zheng Chenggong’s fleet, in exchange for which they hoped that privileges would be granted to the Company.²⁷⁹ In view of the

²⁷⁹ These instructions can be seen in Dam and Stapel, *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, vol. 1, bk.2, 703. The Dutch text read, “dat wy haar te water tegens den mandorijn Coksinja [...] met onse schepen en volk quamen te assisteeren en hem van die kant soodanigh sogten te benaeuwen, dat hy in der Tartaren handen quam te vervallen, en wat voorregten sy ons daarvoor wel soudent willen laten genieten, om daarover in Peking nader te handelen, sodert evenwel aan’t hof te laten blyken onse genegentheyt tot hetselve, mits dat de kosten, dewelke soude vereysschen daartoe gedaan te worden, ons soudent mogen warden vergoedt, of anderssiints by het verkrygen van den handel ons te doen

VOC's earlier dealings with the Japanese government and the king of Siam, there was nothing new about giving assistance in exchange of trading privileges.

In respect to the accuracy of these cityscapes in the Paris manuscript, a positive answer is given by Ulrichs, who writes: "The cityscapes document the embassy's journey from Canton to Peking on Chinese rivers and canals, and are topographically fairly correct. Even today, the existence and location of prominent buildings, like pagodas, can be traced by means of city maps."²⁸⁰

In my opinion, however, this conclusion is too rash. First of all, most of the buildings in the cityscapes of the Paris manuscript are not specific enough to be recognized in real life. Second, it is true that the majority of Chinese cities, villages, and sites that the VOC envoys passed along their way were observed from canals, which influenced the positional relationship between Nieuhof and the cities he depicted. That is to say, the composition not only shows the profile of the city and its distinctive skyline, but also records the topographical features of the city. But the cityscapes' topographical features can hardly be considered accurate when compared with Chinese traditional maps.

Generally speaking, the relationship between the city and the canal in the cityscapes of the Paris manuscript can be divided into two basic layouts. In the first, the city and mountains are horizontally located in the background and the water (canal) occupies the whole foreground. This means the canal runs parallel to or around the city. In the second kind of layout, the water (canal) is also depicted in the foreground of the drawing,

hebben vrydom van alle tollen en gerechtigheeden." It has been discussed in Kops, "Not Such an 'Unpromising Beginning': The First Dutch Trade Embassy to China, 1655–1657," 546.

²⁸⁰ Ulrichs, *Johan Nieuhofs Blick auf China (1655–1657)*, 154.

but its direction is perpendicular to the city, which means it flows towards or through the city. Cityscapes depicted in the second type of layout carry more specific information about the topographical features of the city. This pattern has been exercised in a number of cityscapes. For example, in the drawing folio 153 of the town of Jinghai (静海, fig. 5.2), a river flows from the foreground towards the city wall in the background. However, the accompanying text states that “the little town of Jinghai is situated on the left side of the Canal²⁸¹ [...] beautiful suburbs grow on the banks on either side.”²⁸² According to the text, Jinghai should be located on the left side of the Grand Canal, which means the river would be flowing next to the town rather than through it. When examining the positional relationship between the canal and the city, it may be impractical to use the current site as a reference, since the terrain features may have changed in the last several hundred years, but the Qing Dynasty *Zhi He Quan Shu* (Chinese waterways atlas, 治河全书) should provide a convincing point of reference.²⁸³

²⁸¹ The “Canal” should be the Grand Canal, and the city of Jinghai was actually located on the right side of the Canal.

²⁸² See Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhofs Beelden Van Een Chinareis 1655–1657*, 49. The Dutch text is, “Denzelven ditto voeren voorbij Singleichen (Jinghai), een klein steden, liggende 80 lij van Sinko aan dezelve kant van’t water. ’t Heeft een schoone voorstadt aan beide zijden der reviere en vele volk.”

²⁸³ Zhang Pengyu (张鹏翮), *Chinese Waterways Atlas (治河全书)* (Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 2008).



Figure 5.2. Drawing folio 153 in the Paris manuscript.

This atlas was submitted to the Emperor Kangxi in 1703 by a governor who was in charge of the construction, maintenance, and conservation of the Yellow River, the Grand Canal, the Huai Hai, and the other major rivers in China. As an officially submitted document, this atlas was made with a view to recording the location of the rivers of China, and naturally it contained a great number of paintings of these rivers, and in particular the Grand Canal. Although these paintings are depicted in the Chinese manner, which lacks perspective, three-dimensional effects, and other techniques, they reflect the essential topographical characteristics of the actual place. More important, as these paintings were to serve as the basis for the management of the rivers, special attention had to be paid to the topographical characteristics of the river. Therefore, the maps in this atlas should be able to provide information for the examination of the topographical characteristics presented in the cityscape drawings.

As shown in figure 5.3, the section of Jinghai in the Chinese map presents a different topographical characteristic of this town from the drawing; the Grand Canal clearly flows alongside rather than through the city. Imagining that Nieuhof was on the boat sailing along the Grand Canal and passing through this town, his observation point should be from the boat. Therefore, the compositional arrangement in this drawing, which shows that the river flows towards the town in the background, does not match the topographical feature of the actual place.

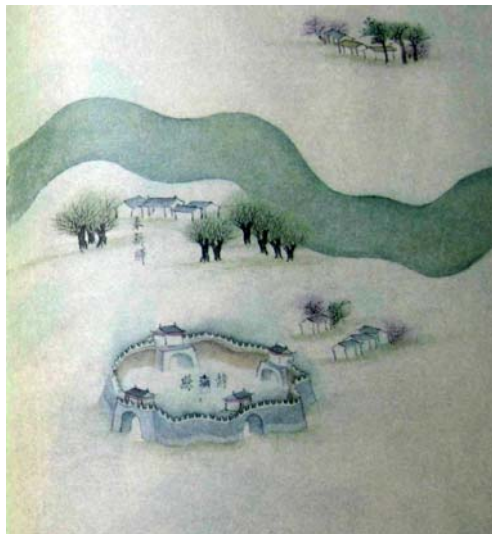


Figure 5.3. Map of the town of Jinghai in the *Zhi He Quan Shu* (Chinese waterways atlas), 1703.

Another good example is the drawing folio 151 which is supposed to represent the town of Qingxian (青县, fig. 5.4). According to the description in the accompanying text, Qingxian is “located on the left side of the canal; here, the canal connects with a branch of the Yellow River, so the expanse of water is very broad. Close by the riverside stands a badly maintained

ancient tower.”²⁸⁴ This description matches the representation in the map of Qingxian in the atlas *Chinese Waterways Atlas* in great and accurate details. This map (fig. 5.5) shows the Grand Canal and above it a branch of the Yellow River. Considering that the embassy group was travelling from southern China to Peking, their direction on this map would have been from left to right, and Qingxian would have been on “the left side of the canal.” Further down, a building complex appears in the map. According to the accompanying inscription, this temple is the Wen Miao (Temple of Literature) and the pagoda is the Kuixing Lou (Tower of Literature). This also echoes the description in the text, which says that an ancient tower stands on the bank and many statues are exposed to the open air.



Figure 5.4. Drawing folio 151 in the Paris manuscript.

²⁸⁴ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhofs Beelden van een Chinareis 1655–1657*, 48. “Den 4 ditto, passerden wij met goeden voorspoed het stedeke Sinkoheen, liggende 120 lij van Suntecien an de slinke zij van de Koninglike Vaart, die haar alhier met een arm van de Gele Revier vermengt en onverzulk wijd en breedtt overloopt. Dicht op de kant van ’t water statt een antijkse pagoda, maar werd slordig onderhouden.”

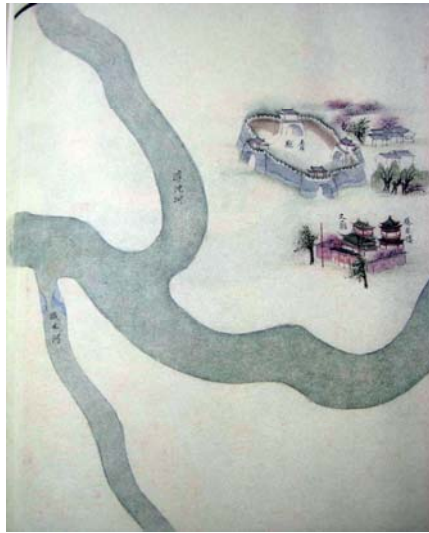


Figure 5.5. Map of the town of Qingxian in *Zhi He Quan Shu* (Chinese waterways atlas), 1703.

Nonetheless, when comparing the drawing with the map, it is evident that neither the temple nor the tower is visible on the bank. In this drawing, the town of Qingxian is arranged in a simple diagonal composition so that the river flows from the left foreground and ends at the right in the middle distance where the city emerges. Being blocked by the knoll in the right side of the foreground, the ultimate direction of the river is unknown; it could either flow through the city or flow around the city wall. Yet, a comparison with the depiction of the town in the Chinese map shows both assumptions to be wrong. First, there is no such river flowing towards the city; second, if the river was flowing around the city, the knoll should not emerge in the right foreground. The bank seems to be an imaginary invention to assist the structural arrangement.

In the Paris manuscript, there is also a rather peculiar drawing positioned next to the cityscape of Canton. It shows up right after the

already earlier quoted description of the destruction of Canton. The accompanying text reads: “On the picture we see the village of Fosan, with a large *dangpu* or fortified pawnshop sticking out high above the surrounding housing.”²⁸⁵ This drawing folio 29 (fig. 5.6) provides another example of a composition showing a river and city. It is similar to the above example, while the foreground takes up almost half the picture and a broad river is located in the middle with banks on either side. This depicts “the famous village of Foshan,” the well-known centre of industry north of Canton, a large township that was not surrounded by city walls. The scene seems very strange, especially considering the tightly packed houses in the background and the weird compositional relationship between the river and the houses located by the water. The river probably takes a turn upon entering the township, and the scene is reminiscent of the watery landscape in the northern Netherlands, so well known to Nieuhof, where one often observes exactly the same situation when a ship sails into a riverside town or village. It looks as if one will sail right into houses but inside the village the river takes a turn and thus creates this *trompe l’oeil* effect.

²⁸⁵ In this particular region many pawnshops are located in fortified edifices to keep off robbers.



Figure 5.6. Drawing folio 29 in the Paris manuscript.

5.2 The refinement of the representation of Chinese cityscape based on Dutch pictorial convention

The mis-presentation of the actual topographical situation was quite common for Dutch artists of the seventeenth century who sought to make their landscape paintings and prints look natural. One interesting example is the townscape of Leiden (fig. 5.7) by Jan van Goyen. In this painting, we see a diagonal section of the riverbank with a few figures in the left foreground, a broad river traversing the picture horizontally, the buildings including a magnificent church standing on the other bank and the heavy clouds covering most of the sky. Such a composition was very familiar to Dutch viewers in the seventeenth century and the buildings, especially the famous Hooglandse Kerk or St. Pancras Church, could be readily identified, thus giving the impression that this cityscape was made “na het leven”. However, closer observation will reveal that the artist has placed Leiden’s famous St. Pancras Church alongside a wide, winding, and imaginary

river.²⁸⁶ In fact, in this painting, the artist has tried to create a reality, as Anthony Bailey says of Vermeer, “whose bits and pieces can be disputed in terms of factual truth but whose artistic ‘rightness’ is overwhelming.”²⁸⁷ Therefore, the practice of selecting some landmarks and inserting them into the wide context of the Dutch countryside, is actually a very common approach among seventeenth-century Dutch artists who sought to make drawings and paintings of cityscapes look natural. In other words, a natural-looking landscape in the seventeenth century did not require an artist to record a scene as faithfully as a photograph, but to select some landmark buildings and to put them into a harmonious composition. The process of selecting objects and arranging the composition mainly reflected the second characteristic of “naar het leven,” namely, to make them look natural.



Figure 5.7. Jan van Goyen, “View of Leiden,” 1643. 39.8 x 59.9 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

²⁸⁶ It has been discussed by Peter Sutton, see Sutton and Blankert, *Masters of 17th-century Dutch Landscape Painting*, 96–97.

²⁸⁷ See Anthony Bailey, *A View of Delft: Vermeer Then and Now* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 110.

Nieuhof must have known certain conventions of how to sketch. In the process of making cityscapes of China, he had to consider at least two factors: the composition and the individual elements in the drawings. It is important to first ascertain the patterns used to compose the elements into an image. Although the composition in some cityscapes is complicated because they share characteristics of low horizontal landscapes, diagonal river courses, vertical framing trees, and some horizontal elements, they can still be categorized by their most prominent characteristic. Generally speaking, two kinds of patterns, the horizontal and the diagonal, are frequently used to arrange the mountains, city walls, and rivers, to compose Chinese cityscapes. The following part further investigates these two patterns and explores their relationship with seventeenth-century Dutch landscape and cityscape paintings and prints.

The horizontal composition

In many cityscapes in the Paris manuscript, the city lies next to a wide body of water and the city wall stretches horizontally across the image, dividing the water in the foreground from the settlements and mountains in the background. Accordingly, the portrait of the city is mainly a profile viewed across the water from afar. This is understandable because the route taken by the VOC's envoy from Canton to Peking was mainly by water, and consequently most of the cities along the way were located on the bank of a river or canal. For instance, in the drawing folio 84 of the town of Tongling (see fig. 4.23), a horizontal line in the middle of the image separates the water and land. The foreground is taken up by water and a magnificent boat floating on the river in the left corner of the image. The city profile is depicted in a narrow scale in the middle against a blank sky that stretches over two-thirds of the image.

This composition recalls the very common arrangement of seventeenth-century Dutch cityscapes such as the painting “View of Zierikzee” by Esajas van de Velde (fig. 5.8), which shares the same compositional arrangement. One can readily see that except for the clouds occupying the sky, and the riverbank and some fishermen in the foreground, the composition is essentially the same as that of the cityscape of Tongling. Both show the town’s silhouette in the background in a linear pattern, while the city profile extends along the riverbank and the river takes up one-third of the picture.



Figure 5.8. Esaias van de velde, “View of Zierikzee,” 1618, 27 x 40 cm, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

Nevertheless, there is another essential difference between these two images. To a large extent, Van de Velde’s painting follows the cartographical tradition of showing the distinctive landmarks, such as the church, the city hall as well as and the surroundings, all of which make the city recognizable. However, in the drawing of the town of Tongling, the city

profile is treated roughly and vaguely. Some buildings are visible, such as the two-tiered, pillar-like building as well as several buildings with typically Chinese up-turned eaves, but these architectural features can hardly be used to identify the town, particularly considering that buildings of the same shape are scattered elsewhere in the drawing. It would not be surprising if Nieuwhof had put a magnificent Chinese boat in the foreground to make up for this rather plain cityscape and distract the viewer's attention from this uninteresting heap of buildings.

The compositional pattern of three superimposed zones (foreground-water-city) was skilfully integrated in a scheme by the contemporary Dutch artists in the representation of foreign lands through which they travelled by water. The painting "View of Itamaracá Island in Brazil" by Frans Post (fig. 5.9) is a good example.²⁸⁸ In this painting, the low island of Itamaracá is observed from the riverbank. A number of regional buildings can be seen on top of the hills. On the riverbank are a European on horseback and another man who stands on the ground and waves to somebody on the opposite bank, possibly calling for the ferry. Two African servants stand beside them holding the reins and carrying fruit. It is known that Post painted a great number of Brazilian landscapes after he returned to Holland in 1646 on the basis of the drawings he made in Brazil, but this particular piece is one of the seven paintings he painted while he was still in Brazil.²⁸⁹ Compared with the landscapes executed in his studio in Holland, this landscape seems less embellished and more faithful to what he had actually observed. To sum up, as simple as it is, this pattern of

²⁸⁸ Many of his drawings were based on a large number of drawings that he made during journeys. See Wolfgang Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (1968; repr. Oxford: Phaidon, 1981), 167–169.

²⁸⁹ Peter C. Sutton, *Dutch & Flemish Paintings: The Collection of Willem Baron van Dedem* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2002), 186–89.

composition is very effective for the artist to make a topographical sketch of a foreign place during his journey.



Figure 5.9. Frans Post, “View of Itamaracà Island in Brazil,” 1637, 63.5 x 88.5 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Furthermore, this way of depicting landscapes has also been applied, with some modification, to contemporary townscapes as well. For instance, in the drawing folio 99 (fig. 5.10), the town of Yizheng seems to have been observed from a very low, distant vantage point. The sky and water stretch across the foreground and background to leave an almost indistinguishable town profile. Such a specific and extreme representation of horizontal composition can also be found in the atmospheric painting, “View of Hoorn” by Abraham de Verwer (fig. 5.11). Other than the sailing ships in the foreground in the painting, these two cityscapes look practically identical in almost every respect, including the numerous masts in De Verwer’s painting, but unexpectedly emerge from among the houses of the town of

Yizheng. Moreover, if the Chinese pagoda and some Chinese-style houses were replaced with churches and other Dutch architectural features, it would be hard to distinguish the Chinese cityscape and the Dutch cityscape with the same composition arrangement.

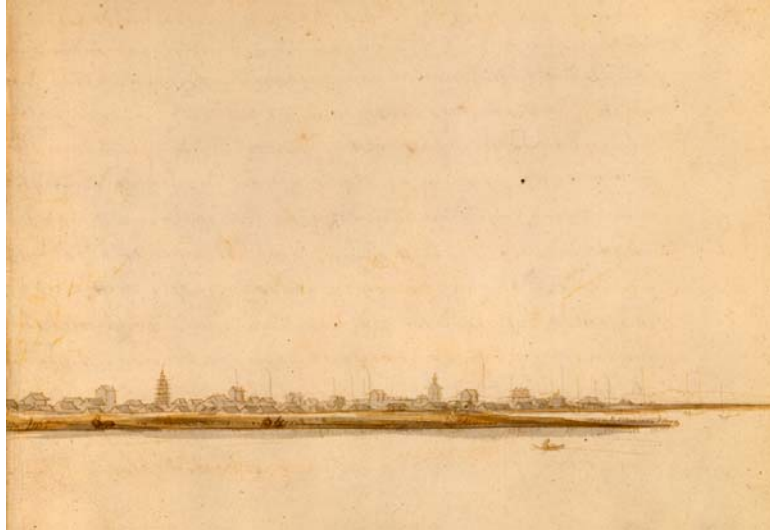


Figure 5.10. Drawing folio 99 in the Paris manuscript.



Figure 5.11. Abraham de Verwer, “View of Hoorn,” c.1645, 51.5 x 95 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

The diagonal composition

In addition to the horizontal pattern, a number of cityscapes are represented in a diagonal composition. In the drawing folio 49 (fig. 5.12), for instance, the upper diagonal is formed by the top line of a succession of mountains from the upper right corner to the lower left; the middle diagonal line is drawn along the city wall from the upper left to the lower right; and the lower one joins the upper one in the distance on the left and runs down the road towards the lower right corner. This triple diagonal pattern actually reminds me a print of Esaias van de Velde, “The Country Road” (fig. 5.13). Comparing these two pictures, we find that in the drawing the trees are replaced by the continuous mountains and the fence is replaced by the typical city wall, while the carriages change into the ruins of vernacular dwellings. But here, it is noteworthy that the ruins of dwellings are very likely to have been seen by Nieuhof on his journey, so they were probably depicted on basis of direct observation.



Figure 5.12. Drawing folio 49 in the Paris manuscript.

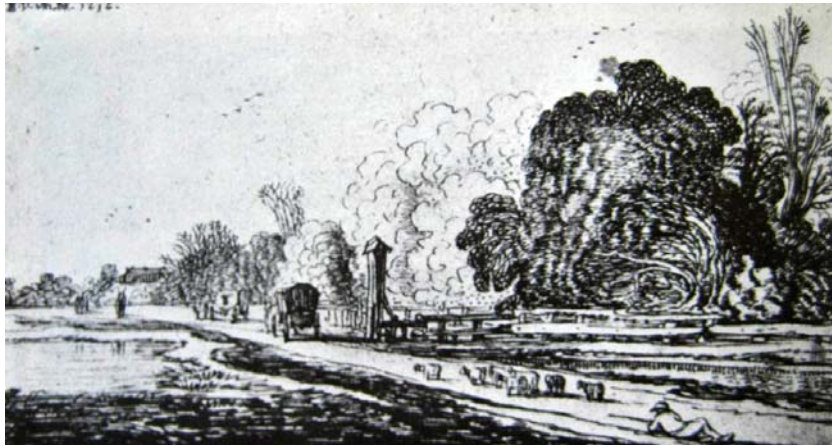


Figure 5.13. Esajas van de Velde, “Country Road,” 1616, Frankfurt, Sadelsches Kunstinstitut.

There are also cases where the diagonal pattern is somewhat altered, by a knoll lying in the right corner, or by juxtaposition with a horizontal line in the background. For instance, in the drawing folio 122 showing the town of Jining (济宁, fig. 5.14), the “double diagonal” formed by the river and the bank is compromised by a straight city wall in the background. Even for such a specific alteration, a similar composition can be easily found in contemporary Dutch paintings, such as the “Grainfields” by Jacob van Ruisdael (fig. 5.15). Folio 122 resembles this painting from the point of view of its composition: in the cityscape of Jining, the left diagonal is a river instead of a road; the Dutch windmill is replaced by typical Chinese architecture; and in place of Dutch houses in the far background we discern a city wall.



Figure 5.14. Drawing folio 122 in the Paris manuscript.



Figure 5.15. Jacob van Ruisdael, "Grainfields," 1665-68, 47 x 57 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The great similarities between the compositional patterns in the drawings in the Paris manuscript and those in seventeenth-century Dutch pictorial material strongly suggest that when producing the drawings, Nieuhof followed certain conventions of contemporary Dutch landscape composition. Whether he did so to overcome the difficulties he encountered with the rough sketches he had made in China, or whether he had sketched them like that on the spot remains unclear. Naturally, by adopting commonly-used devices of landscape composition, the aesthetic effect and harmony of the drawings of Chinese cityscapes would be ensured. To make them look natural, Nieuhof also needed to consider the arrangement of the components of these cityscapes—mountain, city wall, city gate, and so forth. The representation of these components was based to a large extent on direct observation, but the individual elements do not necessarily always appear in the proper place, just as in the case of Jan van Goyen's painting.

The representation of mountains in the background may give us some clues about how Nieuhof dealt with these components. Of the sixty-three cityscape drawings, at least eighteen are embellished with mountains or hills in the background.²⁹⁰ Considering the fancy shape and magnificent size they possess, these mountains and hills were without doubt worth noting. As I have discussed previously, the depiction in chalk and pencil provided an outline for the continuous mountains in the background of the drawing of Bao'en Temple (see fig. 4.33), and lines of mountains appear in many other drawings, for instance, in the drawing folio 66 which is supposed to represent the townscape of the town of Xinxing (fig. 5.16). Here the mountains with seven strange peaks in the background resemble the

²⁹⁰ The last but one drawing with mountains as background is the representation of Batavia and is not included in this group.

mountains in the background of the drawing of the Bao'en temple: in both drawings, the first mountain peak from the right takes up the dominant space; the second, third and fourth peaks from the right also have a fairly jagged shape; the second peak from the left is relatively unassuming. Yet the mountains in this pattern appear repeatedly in the background of the drawings in folios 43, 46, 49, 74, and 78. Clearly, Nieuhof liked the general shape of these mountains, which is why the pattern appears over and over again in other cityscape drawings, even though it is always somewhat altered by adding or reducing one or two peaks.

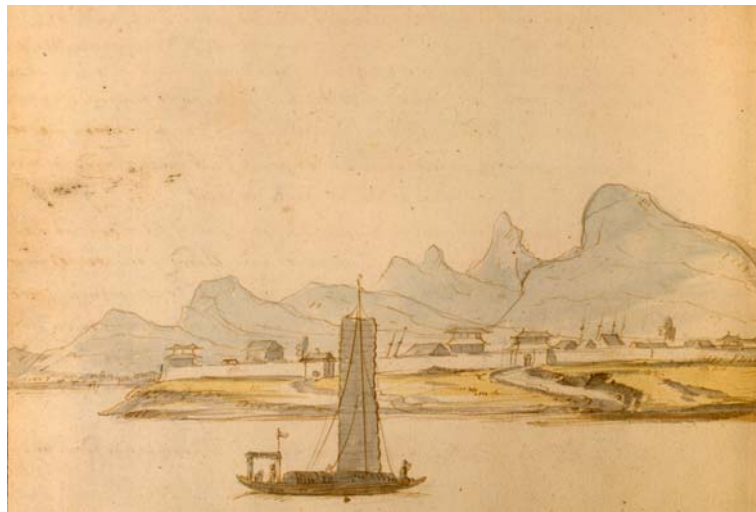


Figure 5.16. Drawing folio 66 in the Paris manuscript.

Thus, even though the depiction of the mountains in this pattern is based on direct observation, its recurrence in different drawings makes us doubt their actual shape. With this hilly pattern in the background, the cityscapes always look the same: a range of various lofty peaks constitute continuous mountains or hills in the background, and their jagged and twisting ridges form a strong contrast to the horizontal foreground which is

usually a straight city wall or quiet river. This is understandable as the purpose of showing them in the background has more to do with the harmony of the whole composition than with “na het leven” representation.

Sometimes the components of the cityscape are randomly placed within a certain composition, as for instance in the drawing of the town of Fengcheng (丰城) in folio 67 (fig. 5.17). The generic contour of the city wall is depicted in pencil and chalk before the depiction is refined and other details—the roofs above the city wall, the riverbank, and the boats—are added in pen and ink. Embellished with an attractive Chinese vessel on the water and a typical city wall, this image conveys the feeling of a Chinese town until we take a closer look at the two oddly shaped buildings in front of the city wall. Their shape suggests that they may be city gates, but this speculation is contradicted by their location, because Chinese city gates are invariably attached to the city wall and do not stand apart outside of the wall. What, then, are these two buildings?



Figure 5.17. Drawing folio 67 in the Paris manuscript.

The accompanying text about this drawing shed some light on their identity: “On the north side of the city is a populous suburb, well and close built with buildings. There are also two great and high triumphal arches, which had been much defaced with the rest of the brave structures in the last bloody invasion.”²⁹¹

This description indicates the existence of two great buildings, which is probably the reason why Nieuhof has arranged two buildings on the bank. These two buildings are supposed to be “Chinese great and high triumphal arches.” However, their form does not resemble the Chinese traditional arch, an example of which is shown in figure 5.18. Therefore, these hastily-drawn, almost symbolic figures do not have the form of a Chinese arch, nor are they properly positioned as city gates.



Figure 5.18. Photograph of a typical Chinese arch in Canton.

²⁹¹ Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China*, 62.

There are many other cases in which Nieuhof's ink-and-watercolor refinements of Chinese cityscapes show more concern for creating an illusion or impression of China than for presenting an accurate representation of what China actually looked like. Folio 58, the drawing of the town of Taihe (泰和, see figure 5.19) provides a more typical example. The town profile consists of a city gate, a gate tower, a pagoda, and other buildings with up-turned eaves, a feature typical of Chinese architecture. With these elements, this townscape in China seems fairly reliable, and the figure holding an umbrella and walking along the narrow path create an environment of human activity and lend the impression that this scene is made from life. However, the two buildings standing on the left side of the city wall cast a shadow on this impression. Their position suggests that they are watchtowers on the city wall, but their shape more closely resembles city gates. Obviously, placing city gates on the top of the city wall does not make much sense in reality. The lack of specificity of these cityscapes may be attributed to two factors. First, as noted above, Nieuhof may not have created many detailed sketches on site as he floated by during his journey in China. Second, at that time, readers would not have been able to judge the credibility of these cityscapes because they had never had the opportunity to see China with their own eyes and there was little other visual material with which to compare Nieuhof's work.



Figure 5.19. Drawing folio 58 in the Paris manuscript.

Another important approach employed by Nieuhof to make representations of China look natural was to embrace Chinese motifs in western settings. For instance, in the drawing folio 134 (see figure 4.8), the representation of the statue Guan-Yin, the impressive column not only provides a reference about the size of the statue, but also conveys a rough idea of what the interior of the Chinese temple looks like. However, his depiction yields a space that seems more European than Chinese. In fact, the appearance and position of this column are reminiscent of contemporary paintings of Dutch church interiors. For instance, the columns in the painting “Interior of the Oude Kerk, Delft” by Gerard Houckgeest (1600–1661) in 1651 (fig. 5.20) are similar in shape to the column depicted in Nieuhof’s drawing. Moreover, in Houckgeest’s painting, the column is a central component of the setting. One consequence of Nieuhof’s arrangement is that a Chinese statue of Guan-Yin seems to have been transplanted to an interior resembling a Dutch church. As it is quite common

for a column to appear prominently in paintings of Dutch churches, this would have created an air of familiarity rather than doubt for the intended audience.



Figure 5.20. Gerard Houckgeest, "Interior of the Oude Kerk, Delft," 1651, 49 x 41 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

5.3 The refinement partly based on direct observation

Nieuhof's drawings are seemingly based on direct observation, but his refinements with pen and ink give a more plausible, natural effect. The drawing representing the occasion when the Dutch envoys were granted an audience by the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1644–61) in the Forbidden City is a good example. This drawing (fig. 5.21) emphasizes the powerful symmetrical compositional design of the Forbidden City, which is depicted as a complex with a large, fabulous building in the middle flanked by two

rows of buildings. In the central courtyard, a group of people kneel on the ground facing the main building while other people stand on either side in front of the row the buildings.²⁹² This matches the description of this occasion in the accompanying text, which reads as follows:

On the first day of October, the ambassadors received the summons to attend an audience with Chinese Emperor, so the Pinkstintou and two officials from Canton and some other people arrived at the lodgings very early to accompany the ambassadors. [...] We were placed in the second courtyard on the left side where the ambassadors waited till daylight. [...] In front, on either side of a high gate stood three heavy elephants, which had been elaboratedly decorated and loaded with gilded towers; because the throng was so vast, we could see no farther. Then we passed through another square and arrived at the court where the Great Cham maintained his residence. On each side of the quadrangle stood soldiers wearing long red robes of figured silk. In the front row on the left side consisted 112 men each of whom held a special banner. Beside the throne stood 22 men holding precious parasols on which were ten round circles, like suns followed by six moons. [...] The Deputy-*toutangh* [an official in the Qing Dynasty] moved to the left, and made signs to the ambassadors that they should wait at the tenth-grade stone, which was to be their station. Being thus placed, the herald

²⁹² The ritual which emissaries had to knock their foreheads on the ground is to show their respect for and submission to the Emperor. See the interpretation by Michael Harbsmeier, "The Dream of Traveling to China," in *Treasures from Imperial China: The Forbidden City and the Royal Danish Court* (Copenhagen: Den Kongelige Solvkaammer, 2006), 354–61.

called to them loudly, saying, go stand before the throne [...] bow your heads three times to the ground, and we went back to our first place. (Den 1^e October kregen Haar E.^s orde om ‘s andren daags voor de keyzer te verschijnen, waarop Pinksintou met twe Kantonsche mandorijns en zommige hovelingen heel vroegh in de logie quamen om Haar E.^s te geleiden. [...] Wij wierden op de tweede plaats van ‘t hoof na de slinke zij gesteld, alwaar Haar E.^s nederzaaten om den dat te verbeyden. [...] Vooruit, aan weersijden van een hooge poort, stonden drie zware olifanten, die zeer kurieus waren uitgeputs en geladen met vergulde torens, daar zoo veell menschen achter zwermden, datt er geen doorzien was. Daarna passierden wij noch een plaats en quamen endlik aan ‘t binnenhoff, alwaar de Grote Cham zijn residentie houdt. Het gansche vierkant was an weersijden bezet met krijgsvolk, die altegaar gekleedt waren met lange rocken van roode gefigurerde zijde stiften. Het voorste gelit aan d’ene zij bestondt in 112 koppen, die ijder een bijzonder veldteken voerden. Naast an den troon stonden 22 mannen met kostelijke zonnescharmen, daarop volgden tien ronde cirkels, als sonnen, toen zes maanen. Hiernevens zach men 16 stangen mett groote zijde quasten van allerley verwe. Bij deze stonden zesendertig standarden. [...] Aan d’andre zijde zach men even ‘tzelfde nevens een ontelbar tall van hovelingen. [...] D’onder-taitong ging an de slinke zij en weez Haar E.^s dat zij an den tienden graadtsteen mosten stillestaan. Toen riep de heerhold als voors., waarop wij altezamen nederknielden en bogen ‘t hooft driemaal

an de eerde, traden toen gezwind terzijden aff en gingen weder op onze eerste plaats.)²⁹³

Many details described in the text have been visualized in the drawing, for instance, the grand building complex, the soldiers standing on either side of the square, and the Kowtow ritual taking place in the center. All this gives the impression that this drawing was made on the basis of direct observation. The contemporary reader must have been amazed by the grand Chinese architecture. So, it is not at all surprising that many copies of this design were made in various media.²⁹⁴

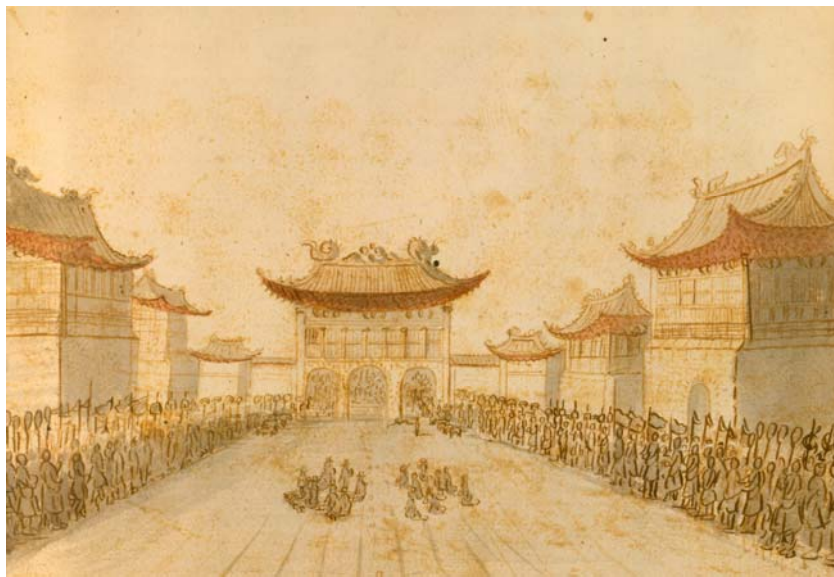


Figure 5.21. Drawing folio 185 in the Paris manuscript.

With our present knowledge of the Forbidden City, we can examine the accuracy of the representation in this drawing at least from the background

²⁹³ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden van een Chinareis 1655–1657*, 53.

²⁹⁴ About the designs based on Nieuhof's picture of the *Taihe Dian*, see Dematte and Reed, *China on Paper*, 14.

building complex. According to Nieuhof's description, the Dutch envoy arrived before daylight and waited in the second square of the Forbidden City. Then, along with the ambassadors of other countries, they went to the court through another square, on either side of which stood soldiers. And it is here that the formal meeting with the Chinese emperor and the ritual of the Kowtow took place. This means the buildings should be located at the second square of the Forbidden City. According to Michael Harbsmeier's interpretation, the building complex should be the earliest European depiction of the Hall of Supreme Harmony (*Taihe Dian*, 太和殿), an audience hall beautifully and lavishly elevated on a three tiered marble terrace.²⁹⁵ On the map of the Forbidden City, the building complex in the second square is the *Taihe Dian* (fig. 5.22).

²⁹⁵ Harbsmeier, "The Dream of Traveling to China," 355.

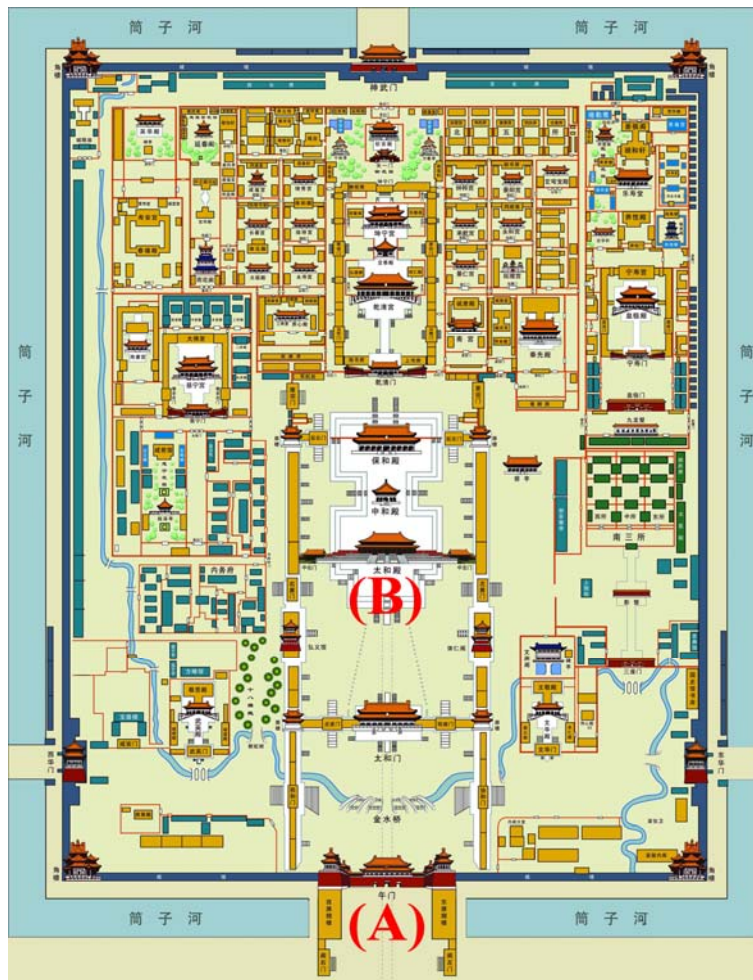


Figure 5.22. A map of the Forbidden City. *A* shows the location of the Wu Men (the southern gate), and *B* shows the Taihe Dian (the Hall of Supreme Harmony).

This was the usual place for Chinese emperors to receive tribute from foreign embassies in the Qing Dynasty,²⁹⁶ and court artists depicted similar occasions as well, as in the painting “Ten Thousand Envoys Come to Pay Tribute” (fig. 5.23). In this painting, some foreign envoys are gathering in

²⁹⁶ For the rules governing where Chinese emperors in the Qing Dynasty met foreign embassies in the Forbidden City, see Changjian Guo, Linyu Feng, and Wuyuan Guo, *World Heritage Sites in China* (中国的世界遗产) (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003), 19.

the courtyard between the Wu Men (午门, see *A* in figure 5.22) and the Taihe Dian and some envoys are presenting gifts to the Chinese emperor during the New Year celebrations held at the Taihe Dian, in front of which eunuchs and officials are waiting.²⁹⁷ Comparing Nieuhof's drawing and the Chinese painting we find that the structure and appearance of the building complex are not the same.



Figure 5.23. Anonymous court artists, “Ten Thousand Envoys Come to Pay Tribute,” 1761. Hanging scroll, colour on silk, 322 x 216 cm, the Palace Museum, Beijing.

To figure out which one of them is more accurate, a comparison with the actual scene (see figure 5.24) is necessary. One may find that quite a few

²⁹⁷ Most of the palace is veiled in mist but, in the space to the right of the *Taihe Dian* a group of eunuchs is preparing sets of return gifts for the envoys.

key features of this magnificent architecture are absent from Nieuhof's drawing.²⁹⁸ The main palace is raised on a three-tiered terrace and has a roof with double eaves decorated with carved dragons and phoenixes, most of them are gilded. However, the shape of the main building in the drawing certainly does not reflect the essential characteristics of the double-roof structure nor the steps which lead to the great audience hall and the great number of columns under the roof. Moreover, in reality the buildings on each side are not as magnificent in their size or as tight in their composition as the buildings shown in the drawing.

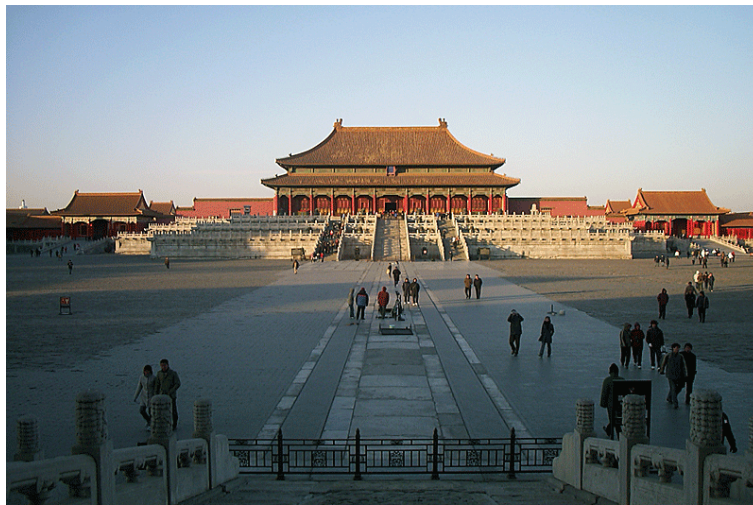


Figure 5.24. Photograph of the Taihe Dian, the Palace Museum, Beijing.

However, when looking at the actual situation of the buildings in Forbidden City we find that the main structure in the drawing greatly

²⁹⁸ The main hall of the Forbidden City is twenty-seven meters high, sixty-four meters wide and thirty-seven meters deep. It has a roof with double eaves and is decorated with carved dragons and phoenixes, most of them gilded. The building is raised on a three-tiered terrace, eight meters high, enclosed by marble balustrades, while those around the same courtyard were kept lower so as to set off the magnificence of the hall. More information on the Taihe Dian, see Zhuoyun Yu and Graham Hutt, *Palaces of the Forbidden City* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), and Guo, Feng, and Guo, *World Heritage Sites in China*, 19.

resembles the Wu Men (午门, figure 5.25), the gate in front of the Taihe Men (太和门, the gate between points *A* and *B* in figure 5.22). As the main entrance of the Forbidden City, it is composed of a series of buildings: the central one is the palace which is nine bays wide, with double roofs; on each side, a thirteen-bay-wide building with a single roof connects the two pavilions at the top.²⁹⁹ The battered red base wall is a three-sided rectangular inverted U on the plan. However, in the manuscript drawing, the connected buildings with single roofs standing on either side are replaced by rows of three separate buildings. Nieuhof must have seen this Wu Men gate, for it is the gate through which the ambassadors had to pass before entering into the Taihe Dian to meet Chinese emperor. This was the same entry for the third Dutch embassy to enter into Peking, as shown in the drawing by Van Doornik (fig. 5.26). Although some details in his drawing of the Wu Men are slightly exaggerated (such as the curved double-roof and relatively high finial), the fundamental complex structure is fairly accurate. So it is possible that Nieuhof was also deeply impressed by the splendid Wu Men and confused it with the Taihe Dian when he made sketches of the imperial palace.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 32.



Figure 5.25. Photograph of the Wu Men, the Forbidden City, Beijing.



Figure 5.26. Pieter van Doornik, “Het Keijzers Hof in Peckin,” 1666–68, *Atlas van Stolk*, Rotterdam.

To a large extent, Nieuhof’s drawing provides western readers with a magnificent impression of what the highly mysterious Forbidden City

looked like and how the Dutch ambassadors met the Emperor. But the background setting—the magnificent buildings in this drawing—appears to be a mingling of the structure of Wu Men and the typical Chinese architecture of Taihe Dian. While it re-creates the awe-filled atmosphere surrounding such an occasion, it is not a precise delineation.

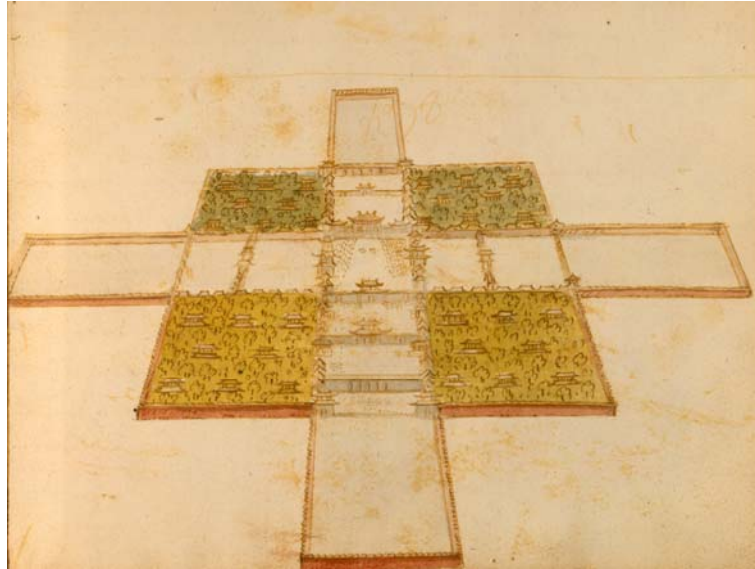


Figure 5.27. Drawing folio 189 in the Paris manuscript.

Similarly, Nieuhof seemingly did not have much time or opportunity to observe the structure of the Forbidden City. To do so, he would have needed to go through the Forbidden City and climb up the *Jing Shan* (景山) hill for a panoramic view of its layout. But he still managed to draw an outline of the Forbidden City, as shown in figure 5.27. In reality, the structure of the Forbidden City is a long rectangle, with a strong north-south axis leading to and through the imperial palace at the centre (see figure 5.22). The map in the manuscript correctly emphasizes the powerful symmetry of layout, but incorrectly inserts additional elements on either side of the rectangular.

What is more, the rough depiction of the buildings and gardens inside of the Forbidden City does not at all reflect the proper location of these buildings. The buildings behind the Taihe Dian in the Forbidden City were the exclusive precinct of the imperial family and therefore would definitely not have been accessible to a foreign envoy.



Figure 5.28. Drawing folio 101 in the Paris manuscript.

One more drawing I would like to discuss shows how Nieuhof combined different scenes into one thematic presentation and made it look natural. In one such overview he shows the various ways in which Chinese beggars wheedled people out of money (fig. 5.28). At the time of the Dutch envoys' visit, China was experiencing a turbulent change of dynasty. Nieuhof records how prosperous cities and towns had been destroyed reducing magnificent buildings into rubble. Ordinary people naturally suffered from the disruption caused by this war and many had been made

homeless. This may have been the reason why Nieuhof encountered so many beggars. He wrote about them as follows:

When we had moored at the afore-said the town (Nanking), various beggars came aboard and indulged in some strange antics. Two of them butted each other's heads to such an extraordinary degree that those who saw them were shocked. They did not stop until we gave them money; [if we had not done so] they would have battered each other to death, which had happened on various occasions. There was another one who was on his knees and seemed to be talking to himself and then he struck his forehead on a heavy rock. He knocked so hard that the earth trembled. Some of them had dry kindling on their heads which they set fire to and they let it burn down completely and it stank. They made so much noise with their shrieking and moaning that it was impossible not to give them something. Those who were blind went in groups. They hit so mercilessly to the rhythm some words on their bare chest and backs that blood spurted forth. Some of these beggars had been misshapen since childhood; their appearance was so ghastly they looked like devils. Later, when we were on the banks of the Yellow River, a man who predicted the weather came aboard; he wanted to look dangerous and impressive so he had stuck an iron bodkin through his cheek and he carried two sharp cutting knives and threatened to harm himself if we did not give him silver. He was clad only trousers and trembled like a man possessed by the devil. All the Tartars were so scared they gave him presents to

solicit a good weather. We laughed about that and we let him go without silver saying we fear God but not the devil.³⁰⁰

Most of the beggars mentioned above can be seen in this drawing. According to the sequence mentioned above, the groups of beggars are depicted in the following arrangement: the two beggars knocking their heads together with great force are in the middle background; the one striking his bare forehead against a round stone is in the left foreground; the one who set fire to combustible material on his head is in the middle distance; the two who beat their breasts with stones are in the left middle ground; the one who carried two sharp knives in his hands and had an iron bodkin through his face is shown on a small boat in the left foreground. The accompanying text in the manuscript states that the last beggar was encountered by the embassy on the banks of the Yellow River (Huang He, 黄河), while the others were encountered in the city of Nanking; therefore, Nieuhof has artificially grouped them together with other groups of beggars.

The other figure in the boat next to this beggar is not mentioned in the manuscript text, but the text in the printed book has some information about

³⁰⁰ Blussé and Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhofs Beelden Van Een Chinareis 1655–1657*, 44. The Dutch text is, “toen wij hier bij deze voorseide stad lagen, quamen onz verscheide bedelaars aan boord, die vreemde kuuren bedreven. Daar was er onder ander twee die zoo geweldig mette koppen tegen malkander stieten, datt het all d’aanschouwers verschrikte. Dit houden zij gaande, tottdat men haar een almoes geeft, off d’een off d’ander moet daar dood blijven leggen, gelijk het menigmaal gebuirdt. Een ander lagh op zijn knijen en murmureerde (zoo ’t scheen) tegen zichzelf, sloeg daarna met het voorhoofd op een zware steen, datt er’t hoofd die zij aansteken en latend tot op de zwaarde afbranden, dattet stinkt, maken dan zoo lange rumoer met krijten en kermen, dat men haar wat geven moet. De blinden gaan met troupen bij malkander, slaan haar op de maat van zommige woorden zoo ongenadig met stenen op de bloote borst en rugge, datter ’t bloedt uitspruit. Zommige van deze truggelaars zijn van jonkheid an heel wanstaltich voortgebracht en zoo ijslik van opzicht als de nicker zelfff. In de Gele Rivier quam onz naderhand een weermaker aan boord, die om vervaarlik te schijnene een ijzre priem door de wang stack en droegh twe scharpe hakmessen, daar hij zichzelf me dreigde te quetsen, zoo men hem geen zilver gaff. Hij zat moedernaakt met een broek om’t lijff en beefed al seen mensch die van den duivel bezeten is. De Tartars waren altegaar zeer verveerd, gaven hem veell schenkadien om goet wee rte hebben.”

him: “Next to him³⁰¹ sat one of the local priests, who had a book in his hand, wherein he said every person who gave him something was to write his name; but the ambassadors refused to do so.”³⁰² On the basis of this text, this figure can be identified as a “priest” or in the Chinese religious context. It was common for monks to raise donations but it is still strange that he appears with the beggar on the boat. In addition to all these beggars, there is a figure rolling over the ground in the left background, but he is neither mentioned in the manuscript text nor in the printed book. Therefore, as said above, this drawing is an artificial combination of at least five scenes based on scattered sketches.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, Nieuhof’s effort to render a sense of naturalness to cityscapes is mainly reflected in composing the scenes in ways commonly found in Dutch landscape paintings, prints, and drawings of the seventeenth century. For a plausible effect, many typical Chinese buildings that do reflect characteristics of Chinese architecture have been inserted into these compositional patterns. In other words, many of Nieuhof’s cityscapes are artificially composed. The procedure may be like this: to produce a “lifelike” drawing, he first arranges the composition according to Dutch convention and then selects elements of typical Chinese architecture such as a pagoda or watchtower. To create an air of even greater familiarity, he occasionally places Chinese statues in Dutch interiors. One consequence of this is that these drawings are made up of such disparate elements that they

³⁰¹ In the text of the printed book, “him” is the beggar who has two bodkins through his hands and in his mouth. But they are not mentioned at the same place in the manuscript text and as this part of the text in the printed book is not a travel account but a general introduction to Chinese costume and custom, it is very possible that the text is based on this drawing.

³⁰² Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China*, 162.

cannot possibly represent a specific location, and some buildings that are supposed to be landmarks can hardly be recognized as such. Therefore, Nieuhof's intention is not so much to produce topographically accurate drawings of Chinese cities, but to make plausible, harmonious scenes of China that appeal to and please Western readers. This approach is particularly understandable when we consider that Nieuhof's artistic sensibilities are rooted in and affected by conventional Dutch notions of pictorial tradition. The sense of familiarity and naturalness obtained through this approach will have satisfied European spectators in their thirst for fantasies about a distant and exotic empire and will have given them the impression that these drawings were made "na het leven."