

How the Lotus Got its Own Administration

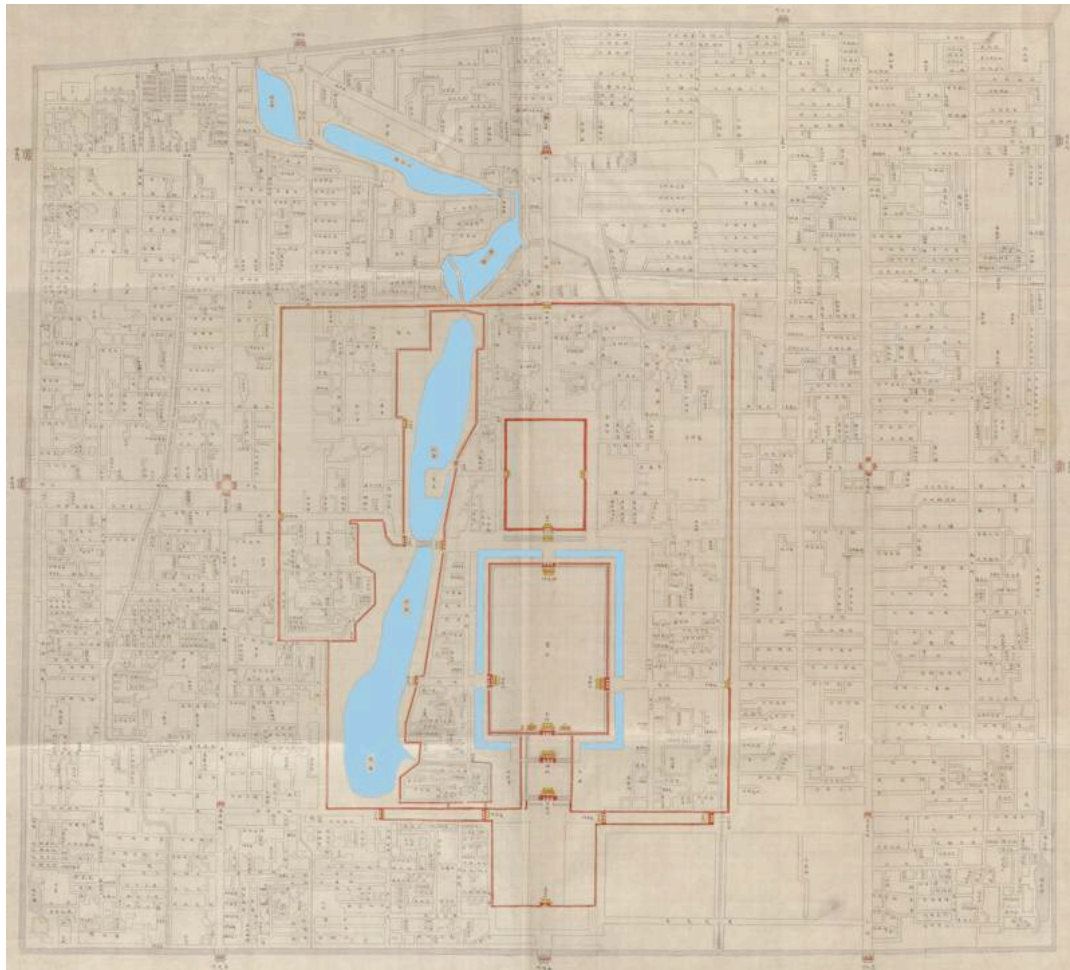
By Martina Siebert



View to the north over the “Middle Lake” of the Westpark towards the “Rainbow Bridge” and the “White Stupa.” The lake in the foreground is completely covered in lotus plants (from: Ogawa, Kazuma: *Shinkoku Pekin kōjō shashinchō*. Tōkyō 1906).

Actually the lotus is a very ordinary plant. Nevertheless, during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) a complex bureaucratic structure was built up around this plant. The lotus was part of the Imperial Household, the palace machine that produced money, things and identity for the Manchurian Court.

On 47 hectares of water bodies adjacent to the Forbidden City in Beijing lotus was cultivated on a grand scale. The harvested roots went first to the imperial kitchens and deserving officials, any remainder was sold for silver. The whole was the responsibility of the Garden Office and was just as meticulously planned as the representative functions of the Westpark. But what did it mean to “plan” the lotus? What was important and recorded? And what was tacitly implied and left out of the “histories of planning”?



Map of the Tartar city with the embedded Imperial City, the Westpark and the Forbidden City surround by moats. The blue areas denote water bodies planted with lotus, the red areas denote the walls of the Imperial and Forbidden Cities (Library of Congress, Map Division).

After taking over the rule of China the Manchurian Qing established a detailed formulated bureaucracy on all levels. The record keeping was particularly painstaking in the case of the imperial household, which, with its silk and porcelain manufacture and its monopoly on furs, jade and ginseng was a prosperous and profitable business over a long period of time. With its every more complex web of "Regulations" and the Qing officials also reacted to the errors of their predecessors. In the previous Ming dynasty, eunuchs had ruthlessly dominated these profitable areas. Yet, the Qing would also experience some spectacular abuses of authority.

The Regulations set out even the smallest details. They specified the color and quality of the yellow cloth to wrap the lotus roots when delivered to the palace kitchen. They laid out how the worn-out punt poles were to be re-purposed as sickle handles to cut the withered lotus leaves and trim the over-grown roofs. They further stipulated that the blades for the sickles were not to be sharpened by the garden office, this responsibility was to be handed over to the expertise of the imperial armoury.

For their other duties and the organization thereof the garden office had independent responsibility. They were merely required to inform the central office of the imperial household about any expenses in monthly or annual reports. This independence was partly based on the income from the leasing of a total of 212 hectares of water bodies in the Inner City and

northwest and south of Beijing for the cultivation of lotus plants as well as the sale of surplus roots from the Westpark.

In 1814 these business practices generated about 57 kilos of silver for the garden office. This appears as “lotus-money” in the administrative files and regulations and was treated almost as a separate currency. For example, it was spent on repairing the sluice gates that regulated the water level in the Westpark lakes. The regulations made it a priority to repair and re-use all working components as far as possible. If anything else was needed it was to be bought outside the palace with “lotus money.” If it was too expensive then money needed to be saved and increased through interest from money-lending.



From: Xu Guangqi's Agricultural handbook (1639).

But lotus was not only worth money. The plant was an ingredient in food and medicine, a decorative flower and an agricultural product. In bloom the plants contributed to the scenic landscape of the Westpark and inspired more than one poet. In autumn the withered leaves were cropped and the masses of organic matter carted away. Lotus roots grow in long chains horizontally in the mud. Harvest workers had to churn up and loosen the lake bottom by stamping through the mud and then pull out the chains of roots. All of this had to be coordinated with the reception of foreign delegations, ritual ceremonies and imperial festivities.

Many “histories of planning” can be portrayed with this example. The focus of the research is not so much about economic success or lack thereof, rather to see which different systems and processes lotus cultivation was embedded in, and which did it cause or construct. Where did it seem better to plan bigger and estimate roughly, where was it better to outsource responsibility or predetermine every tiny detail.

A look at planning processes shows historians where and when knowledge was systemized, what was written down, what was recognized as expertise and which areas and processes were accepted unthinkingly or deliberately ignored.