

The

Chinese

Garden



GARDEN TYPES FOR CONTEMPORARY  
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE



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# The Chinese Garden

With a Foreword by Franco Panzini

Birkhäuser  
Basel

The background image is a photograph of a traditional Chinese garden. In the foreground, there is a pond with green water and several lily pads. To the left, there are dense green bushes. In the middle ground, a traditional Chinese pavilion with a dark tiled roof and red pillars is visible, surrounded by trees. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

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A lush garden scene with a pond, lotus leaves, and large trees. The background is filled with dense green foliage and tall trees. In the foreground, a pond with large green lotus leaves and a few yellow flowers is visible. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

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## Foreword

After a long period of near-oblivion, the Chinese Garden seems to be entering a fruitful new season. Recent years have brought many books and articles on the subject, and international periodicals now regularly publish landscape projects conceived in China.

The development leading to this recent success of the Chinese Garden outside China has been decidedly irregular, almost as though it were following the principles – so influential in Chinese Gardens – of *fengshui*, where linearity has no place.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, when a few European visitors – Catholic missionaries, first of all – gained access to the court of Beijing, capital of a willfully isolated country, they discovered gardens whose composition was based on evocation of natural landscape features reproduced in iconic and allusive forms. Their letters describing those highly original gardens, published in the West, contributed not only to the birth of the Landscape Garden in England, but aroused a gardening sinophilia; images of Chinese Gardens appeared on porcelain and tapestries, and fantastic imitations were created in aristocratic parks à la mode. But with the political decline of the empire toward the end of the 18th century, international consideration of China changed, and the country was no longer seen as a place of ancient culture but rather as an appetizing prey. During the long eclipse that began with the dissolution of the empire, the gardening tradition was all but forgotten.

It was only thanks to the general improvement in communications and above all the development of photography that documentation of that tradition became available to the world. In 1909, the genial French banker, philanthropist, traveler and dreamer Albert Kahn launched the project of collecting a photographic record of the entire earth. The resulting collection provided glimpses of ancient gardens, including a series of photographs made in China by the French photographer Stéphane Passet in 1912. These melancholy images, made with pioneering color technique the same year the last emperor abdicated and the Republic was proclaimed, reveal an ancient world about to disappear. Thanks to them, we can see the majestic imperial gardens of Beijing.

Decades later, the first panorama of Chinese Gardens was given to the world by a northerner, Osvald Sirén, a great early scholar of Chinese art history. When he became a professor of fine arts at Stockholm University in 1908 he also, like many European intellectuals of that period, became a student of theosophy; it was perhaps for that reason that he developed an interest in Asia and particularly in Chinese art. The expertise he developed led to his nomination in 1926 as curator of Chinese painting and sculpture at the National Museum of Art in Stockholm.

Sirén was a passionate photographer. During his four visits to China and Japan between 1918 and 1935, he was able to document the gardens of Beijing, Hangzhou and Suzhou. His records of those fragile green spaces have great value and were the basis of his *Gardens of China*, a book published in 1949 but written in Lidingö during the war; in this island town north of Stockholm Sirén had a country retreat featuring its own little Chinese garden. *Gardens of China* is not only an extraordinary collection of photographs, but also a scholarly text on the ways Chinese Gardens were composed, ways Sirén began to study both in terms of modalities and of general organization.

Sirén understood both the decorative and the symbolic value of the gardens' huge rocks, as well as the complementary value of the water, and he also understood that the mode of composition of a Chinese Garden was inspired by the way painted landscape scrolls were unrolled for viewing: "The Chinese garden can never be completely surveyed from a certain point. It consists of more or less isolated sections which must be discovered gradually and enjoyed as the beholder continues his stroll... he is led on into a composition that is never completely revealed." He noted compositional tricks, like the idea of "borrowing scenery", which was a technique of framing sections of the landscape outside the garden so as to bring it inside, with the ultimate aim of making the garden appear larger than it actually was.

Sirén's pioneering work was followed by many other books which dealt at least partially with the techniques used to create Chinese Gardens, beginning with the first modern treatment by a Chinese author, the scholar Liu Dunzhen, *Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, published in a Chinese edition in 1979, then in a partial English translation in 1982 and eventually as a complete English edition in 1993.

With the spread of oriental philosophies and literature, which undoubtedly do influence these gardens, spatial organization has come to be viewed as secondary to the metaphysical component. Rarely has there been an analysis of the material elements constituting a Chinese Garden, aimed at discovering the rules of distribution, proportions and relations guiding the use of those elements. Philosophical, religious or literary interest has prevailed, creating confusion between the references behind a composition and the compositional techniques used to elicit the desired effects. To paraphrase a maxim borrowed from another context, the message got confused with the medium.

It is precisely in the ways and strategies of composition that the Chinese Garden features characteristics that are unique in the history of gardens. These become fully evident in an analysis of the physical apparatus created within the garden's space in order to inform the visitors' visual and mental perceptions. Investigation of the material ways in which Chinese Gardens were engineered can offer ideas for current research and design - elaborating on the Chinese Garden's capacity for constructing a narrative, for integrating with the built environment, but also for its manner of embosoming the individual in a natural system. These gardens foreshadow environmental sustainability. Evocation of the elements and landscapes of the Chinese Garden is not merely a delicate historical note, but parallels today's interest in environmental requalification and reconstruction of damaged habitats. Far from being a precious intellectual exercise, the search for a harmonious microcosm constitutes a vigorous enunciation of the need for sustainability in all creations. Studying the compositional methods of Chinese Gardens is not only a deeper way to understand one of the great adventures in humanity's relation with nature, but also an important contribution to the evolution of contemporary landscape architecture.

Franco Panzini



Chapter 1

Evolution

and

Typology



In the second act of *Turandot*, Giacomo Puccini's unfinished opera written in the early 1920s and set in fabled Imperial-era China, three ministers of state improbably named Ping, Pong and Pang are complaining about the rigid life they are forced to lead at the court of the beautiful and cruel princess Turandot. They would prefer to live in their peaceful country homes far from the capital:

*"I have a house in Honan  
with a little pond so blue,  
all surrounded by bamboo.  
And here I am, wasting my life,  
racking my brains over sacred books..."*

Puccini composed *Turandot* at a time when Europe had long been fascinated by the exotic Orient, and the libretto's description of the private garden of one of those officials shows clearly what Westerners saw as the essence of the green architectures of the Far East: naturalness (I-1). The libretto mentions bamboo and a little pond, stereotypical features of a Chinese Garden, but in previous centuries many Western visitors to China – merchants, travelers, missionaries, ambassadors – had far more thoroughly described the parks they had been able to see. These visitors always commented on the natural aspect of these gardens, as well as on what appeared to be a complete lack of order in their plans, something far different from the Western approach (I-2).



I-1 \_\_\_\_\_

I-2 \_\_\_\_\_

I-3 \_\_\_\_\_

I-4 \_\_\_\_\_

## Artificiality and Naturalness

Western visitors, in their accounts and descriptions, were often attempting to outline the inherent characteristics of Chinese Gardens, as distinct from all other gardens. Their “natural appearance”, implying “irregularity” of forms and thus an apparent general confusion, was a constant theme. But the French Jesuit missionary Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727-1780) explained how, in fact, this irregularity was entirely calculated, an artifice intended to evoke the simplicity of a natural landscape<sup>1</sup> (I-3; I-4). The apparent simple appearance of the Chinese Garden, with its anti-urban quality, its placid hamlets of pavilions, its silences, suggested to the Jesuit the image of a rural naturalness. Summing up the Chinese Garden’s main, common characteristics, he wrote that “the Gardens of China are a studied but natural imitation of the various beauties of the countryside, in hills, valleys, gorges, pools, little plains, sheets of water, brooks, isles, rocks, grottoes, old caves, plants and flowers”<sup>2</sup>. The multiple ways in which nature’s scene was evoked had the purpose of calling up emotional reactions, as Cibot explained: “A garden thus should be the living and animated image of all that one finds there [in nature], to engender in the soul the same sentiments, and to satisfy the eyes with the same pleasure”<sup>3</sup>.

The ability of the Chinese to grasp the many forms through which “real” nature could present itself in the artificial context of the garden was, for Westerners, quite striking. The Englishman Lord George Macartney (1737-1806), who in 1793 led the first British embassy to the Qianlong Emperor, commenting on the design of the imperial garden of *Yuanming yuan*, “Garden of Perfect Brightness”, near Beijing (I-5), noted in his journal: “[The Chinese gardener’s] point is to change everything from what he found it... and introduce novelty in every corner... If there be a smooth flat, he varies it with all possible conversions. He undulates the surface, raises it in hills, scoops it into valleys and roughens it with rocks. He softens asperities, brings amenity into the wilderness, or animates the tameness of an expanse by accompanying it with the majesty of a forest”<sup>4</sup>.



I-1: Olympic Forest Park, Beijing.  
The concept of the park deals with an investigation into the sense of naturalness which first engendered Chinese Gardens.

I-2: Yu yuan, “Garden to Please”, Shanghai.  
A pavilion overlooking one of the many ponds of the garden.

I-3: Canglang ting, “Surging Waves Pavilion”, Suzhou. The pond is bordered with rocks.

I-4: Yu yuan. Rocks simulating a crest of a hill are arranged around the reflecting pool.

I-5: Tang Dai and Shen Yuan, *Forty Views of Yuanming yuan*, 1747, vol. 1, view n. 4, *Luyue kaiyun*, “Engraving the moon and carving the clouds”. Ink and watercolor on silk.

If we wanted to condense into a slogan Chinese garden design's distinctive attribute through time, thus identifying a unique compositional formula, it could be this: artificiality in nature<sup>5</sup> (I-6). Chinese Gardens show an apparent natural simplicity, an endeavor to restore, sometimes in rather tiny areas, the rhythms and diversity of nature. Occasionally this result is achieved through a concentration on a few elements, but more often nature's multi-faceted appearance is evoked through diversification of the garden's aspects. The presence of different and often surprising settings, which follow one another without any apparent hierarchy, makes the spatial perception of the garden difficult. But, despite their apparent confusion, Chinese Gardens are in fact organized and ordered. They are places where the visitors' senses are continually stimulated through compositional effects intended to awaken curiosity, surprise and aesthetic appreciation. Chinese Gardens are slow. Like films, their effects are built through a sequence of different scenes and settings; separated by screens, walls and doorways, theirs is an unfoldment, a revelation by degrees. Chinese Gardens are never perceived in their entirety. Like music and poetry, they are built through progression, variation and repetition of theme, rhythm and elements, which make them coherent and harmonious. These can be considered the common characteristics defining the Chinese Garden type through time.

In this composite character derived from the natural landscape, Chinese Gardens show analogies with traditions developed in other historical and geographical contexts.

Chinese Gardens are in fundamental harmony with Japanese Gardens, whose origin was influenced by the Chinese tradition (I-7). The two types share the intent of representing the basic characters of the natural environment in miniaturized and metaphorical form. Where they differ is in the manner of that representation. Japanese Gardens express a predilection for a formal sobriety of rural inspiration, a compositional understatement which reached its peak in Zen monasteries toward the end of the 15th century with the creation of *karesansui*, dry gardens made up of a few essential elements: rocks, gravel, moss. The great aristocratic Japanese Gardens, organized as itineraries through different scenes as in China, are more fluid in moving from one scene to another; they do not adopt those explicitly artificial visual devices of Chinese tradition like walls of separation between zones of the garden (I-8).



I-6: House of Consequa in the suburbs of Canton.

I-7: Koishikawa Korakuen, Tokyo. Built starting from 1629, the garden was inspired by the collection of different scenes typical of Chinese Gardens.

I-8: Shugakuin Rikyu, Kyoto. Built in the mid-17th century, the garden of this great imperial villa is an example of a Stroll Garden, designed as fluid itineraries through different scenes.

I-9: Stowe, Buckinghamshire. Both Chinese and English Landscape Garden traditions share an appreciation for a constructed naturalness.



The similarity of Chinese Gardens with the English Landscape Garden at a first glance is surprising. Yet the celebration of naturalness shared by both traditions was engendered by quite different motives. The English Landscape Garden was born of an almost epic exaltation of the productive countryside; it is a romantic presentation of nature lived in and transformed by men and women through the course of time. The Chinese Garden, by contrast, represents the superior natural order which human beings belong to and to which it is right for them to submit: at least for the time when they are in the garden (I-9).

Historical Chinese Gardens are linked with their contemporary version and current trends in composition by the way these both feature water as an important presence, and both emphasize naturalness. This connection is not limited to formal similarities, and even moves beyond differences in metaphysical interpretation, because both the traditional and the contemporary approach are based on the recognition of the innate human need to maintain contact with nature's vitality, even if experienced in a distilled form, as happens in a garden.

## Ethics

The philosophical and metaphysical historical context which created the palimpsest of meanings implicit in the Chinese Garden is characterized by two main doctrines: Confucianism and Daoism<sup>6</sup>. These two philosophical systems were born in the same period, the 6th century BC, a period of great political and social changes. Their origins lay in the teachings of Kongfuzi, "Master Kong", whom the West knows as Confucius (551-479 BC), and Laozi (6th century BC), the "Old Master", a legendary figure, considered as the author of the main Daoist foundational texts.

Confucianism as a group of philosophical doctrines engendered a political ethic rather than a religion. Social relations and obligations were central to its teachings, and the underlying principle was that only in society could an individual reach self-fulfillment; life's ultimate purpose was considered in function of the role and activity of the individual. The family, as the original, spontaneous and natural form of association, was taken as a model for society. Confucianism looked at man working in a definite context, in society and within the family. Daoism, based on the principle of the unity of the cosmos, taught rather that man belonged to a vaster order of things: the purpose of life was to seek harmony with the forces of nature. Both conceptions influenced gardens in China. The garden, as part of the family dwelling, was a place for social relations, but as a protected and isolated place it was also a space for



the meditation and contemplation of nature. This double philosophical inspiration was even more apparent in the radical juxtaposition of the conceptions of domestic architecture and of the garden: the former followed a geometric matrix based on symmetry and hierarchical relations among the parts, while the latter remained rather the realm of spontaneity and imagination (I-10). In proposing a connection with the natural world, the garden maintained a complete formal autonomy, which neither had its source in the architecture of the main building nor was subordinate to it, as instead was the case in the Western tradition (I-11). If the domestic structure responded to Confucian principles, the green open space, in its search for a concentrated and allusive natural quality, was rather a response to the dictates of Daoism and Buddhism, the latter being a later cultural and religious import from India, spreading into China from the 1st century AD onwards.

This apparent separation of references did not produce any dichotomy. China had an assimilative attitude to religion: Confucian geometry was joined, through Daoism and Buddhism, to a mystical appreciation of nature as expressed in garden design (I-12). In the heart of Chinese cities, private gardens attached to urban dwellings integrated a *summa* of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist ethics: they were created by high officials with the purpose of finding moments of calm and contemplative appreciation of nature without distancing themselves from their duties toward their families and the state.

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| 1 Entrance Hall  | 9 Ancient Five Pines Courtyard              | 16 Twin Fragrance Celestial House      |
| 2 Ancestral Hall   | 10 Pavilion of True Delight                 | 17 Fan-shaped Pavilion                 |
| 3 Hall of Joyous Feasts  | 11 Hall of Faint Fragrance and Thin Shadows | 18 Pavilion in Memory of Wen Tianxiang |
| 4 Small Square Hall  | 12 Stone Boat                               | 19 Imperial Stele Pavilion             |
| 5 Hall Bowing to the Mountains Peaks and Facing the Cyprus Trees | 13 Flying Waterfall Pavilion                | 20 Tower of Tall Slender Bamboo        |
| 6 Chamber Lying in the Clouds                                    | 14 Pavilion in the Heart of the Lake        | 21 Hall of Standing in the Snow        |
| 7 Tower with View of Mountains                                   | 15 Asking the Plum Trees Tower              |  |
| 8 Lotus Flower Hall  |   |  |



I-10: Wangshi yuan, "Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets", Suzhou. A complex of pavilions in the inner part of the garden.

I-11: Shizi lin, "Lion Grove", Suzhou. Plan of the garden.

I-12: Yu yuan, "Garden to Please", Shanghai. Several pavilions are scattered through the many rock arrangements of the garden.

I-13: Xihu, "West Lake", Hangzhou. One of the three artificial islets of the lake.

I-10 \_\_\_\_\_  
I-12 \_\_\_\_\_

## Origins and Spatial Evolution

### The Gardens of the Ancient Dynasties

The most remote precedents of Chinese Gardens were the royal hunting enclosures and animal preserves of the earliest dynasties<sup>7</sup>. The first reports of hunting preserves come from the Xia, Shang (c. 1600-1050 BC) and Zhou (c. 1050-256 BC) kingdoms, partly mythical dynasties having fenced properties featuring watercourses and pools, as well as wild animals and pavilions for court ceremonies. The habit of possession of animal preserves continued in time to be considered an attribute of royalty.

The empire was constituted in 221 BC, when the ruler of the state of Qin, having unified the country, declared himself the sovereign of China with the name Shihuangdi, "First Emperor" (reigned 221-206 BC); he established his capital at Xianyang, northwest of the modern city of Xi'an. It was near Xianyang that the first great park was created: *Shanglin*, "Supreme Forest". In addition to using it as a hunting preserve, the emperor had reconstructed fragments of gardens and palaces of the lands he had conquered, and to underscore the symbolic value of the park, he also gathered there animals and plants offered as tribute from vassal states.

The following dynasty, the Han (206 BC-220 AD), built its capital near the site of the capital of the Qin. The new center was called Chang'an (today's Xi'an); it was a lively cosmopolitan city, commercially influential as the place where what became known as the Silk Road began. The *Shanglin* park, inherited from the preceding emperor, was expanded and enriched by the sixth emperor of the Han dynasty, who ascended to the throne with the name Wudi (reigned 141-87 BC). There he brought plants and animals from distant lands, and had pavilions and little temples built, as well as a great artificial body of water, named Kunming Lake. Even though it remained mainly a hunting park, *Shanglin* became a miniature of the empire itself, with wooded heights, watercourses and pools. That was how one of the characteristics of China's garden culture came to be developed through time: the aesthetic of a collection of landscapes.

In that park, Wudi had an original composition built, destined to be replicated many times in later periods: the Islands of the Immortals. According to legend, the Immortals were semi-divine beings who, thanks to the practice of magic, had managed to acquire eternal life; they were thought to live in richly wooded mountainous islands beyond the coasts of China. The emperor decided to have those places represented in his park, creating three little islands in an artificial pool called Taiye Lake (I-13).



During the Han the formation of a new elite of state functionaries – aristocratic scholars appointed to run the civil service after tough examinations based on Confucian classics – and the possibility of private ownership of land, which enabled wealthy families to expand their properties through acquisitions, set the stage for the spread of private gardens. The end of the Han dynasty led to the dissolution of the empire and general political instability under the Six Dynasties (220-589).

In contrast with the political turbulence of the times, or perhaps as a direct reaction to it, paintings of nature, architecture and the art of the garden were pervaded by an aesthetic of detached elegance and simplicity. Created in cities by aristocrats and high officials, private gardens were intended to express the Daoist tendency to evade the complexity of daily life, in a search for harmony with nature and unity with the universe. Instead of vast spaces where emperors exhibited wealth and political power, these gardens were intimate and protected places where it was possible to take temporary refuge from harsh social and political surroundings.

The search for ways to create an idyllic atmosphere for increasingly cultivated patrons led to an accentuation of the gardens' literary and evocative nature (I-14). Trees, groups of plants, little hills and islands were poetically composed to recall real landscapes. The evocation in gardens of famous Chinese landscapes became a habitual practice, promoting the invention of techniques for realizing artificial heights and bodies of water (I-15).

I-14: Shizi lin, "Lion Grove", Suzhou.  
A micro-landscape of fragments of rocks and little plants, composed on a flat stone tray, is redolent of a natural landscape.

I-15: Huqiu shan, "Tiger Hill", Suzhou.  
Miniature trees and rockeries are carefully arranged to evoke real cliff faces.

I-16: Suzhou. The city is crossed by a large number of canals.

I-17: Suzhou. The canal flowing along the southern perimeter of the Ou yuan, "Couple's Garden Retreat".



I-14



I-15

## The Gardens of the Sui and the Tang

At the end of the 6th century, the Sui dynasty (581-618) reunited the country. The second emperor of this brief dynasty, Yangdi (ruled 604-617), made the city of Luoyang the eastern capital of the empire and had a huge park created nearby, *Xi yuan*, "West Garden". In it a brook wound its way through 16 small gardens before dashing into a great lake marked by three islands graced with pavilions. Other channels of water connected this central lake with smaller pools, and it was only through this dense navigable network that it was possible to reach the main palace, so that water was the protagonist of the garden.

The form of this river-style garden, created by a complex system of serpentine channels connecting its various parts, reflected the significant advances Imperial China had made in hydraulic engineering. The highest expression of this technological process was an impressive territorial achievement of the Sui dynasty: the Grand Canal.

This was not a single channel, but rather a complex system of waterworks connecting rivers, lakes and already existing canals, making a waterway which then was roughly 2,500 km long. From the city of Hangzhou, located south of the Yangtse River delta and famous for its production of silk, tea and salt and surrounded by China's best land for rice production, the channel went north toward the city of Suzhou; it turned toward the interior then to reach the Yellow River and the capitals Luoyang and Chang'an, thence proceeding northeast toward the area of today's Beijing. Dug between 605 and 611, the Grand Canal testified to the reunification of the Chinese Empire, of which it became the main communication artery<sup>8</sup> (I-16; I-17).

The following era, the Tang dynasty (618-907), was a period of great development and well-being for China, in particular of creativity in the arts and technology: it was at this time that gunpowder was invented. The parks of the Tang emperors imitated some features of the gardens of preceding dynasties, thus legitimizing their rule. Like the parks of the Qin and Han periods, the Tang imperial gardens were huge and contained vast collections of



plants, both native and exotic, fruit of the institutional practice of sending tributes to the imperial court from the provinces of the kingdom, their transport now being facilitated by the Grand Canal (I-18; I-19; I-20).

The central element of garden design continued to be water, as it had been under the Sui dynasty. The grand imperial park *Huaqing* created by the Xuanzong Emperor (reigned 712-756), sixth sovereign of the Tang dynasty, near the imperial city of Chang'an, at the foot of the Lishan hills, was an example. Sources of thermal water in the hills were enclosed within the park's perimeter, whose design was organized around a series of artificial basins. The late Tang period was marked by a widespread aesthetic interest for rocks taken out of lakes or rivers, or quarried in mountains. Single weather-beaten or particularly shapely rocks, curious in outline or color, were placed on sculpted pedestals, or placed inside pots and situated in the gardens (I-21; I-22). A great number of beautifully formed rocks could be admired in the *Pingquan zhuang*, "Pingquan Villa", a suburban garden built south of the city of Luoyang. Created in 825 by Li Deyu (787-850), one of the Tang dynasty's most important political figures, this garden was a sort of open-air cabinet of curiosities; exotic plants and trees and rocks of unusual and fantastic appearance from various zones of China formed the collection, whose owner had elaborated a proper catalogue for them<sup>9</sup>.



I-18: Nan Lian Garden, Hong Kong. Opened in 2006, the public park is inspired by the garden style developed during the Tang dynasty.

I-19: Nan Lian Garden. Clusters of rocks of bizarre shape are composed among the vegetation to create a scenic view.

I-20: Nan Lian Garden. Water is the main element of the garden design; the park is organized around two artificial lakes connected by a winding stream and bordered with rocks.

I-21: Qianlong Garden within the Ningshou gong, "Palace of Tranquil Longevity", Forbidden City, Beijing. An enormous single rock placed on a sculpted marble pedestal is the visual highlight of this small courtyard.

I-22: Yu yuan, "Garden to Please", Shanghai. A stone composition overlooking an artificial pond; the central rock, called "Exquisite Jade Rock", emerges as the chief feature.



I-18 \_\_\_\_\_

I-19 \_\_\_\_\_ I-20 \_\_\_\_\_