

Preface

Walking into a Chinese garden, one cannot help but be enchanted by its unique oriental flavor. Walking in an atmosphere of tranquility and peace, one will discover something unlikely to be found in Western architecture – delicate and refined, Chinese gardens are both complex and peaceful. In contrast with natural scenery, the beauty of Chinese gardens lies in their fusion of culture and art. In northern imperial gardens, natural scenes with bridges, creeks and winding paths are interspersed with magnificent palatial architecture, representing royal dignity; the Summer Palace in Beijing is perhaps the most typical example. In contrast, the private gardens south of the Yangtze River, such as the Lingering Garden, the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Master-of-Nets Garden, make use of hills, rivers and naturally rich vegetation and achieve a charm not to be found in the northern gardens. These gardens typically belonged to government officials, merchants and scholars, and served as part of their private residences, combining living quarters, reception halls and studies with a fascinating array of pavilions, corridors, terraced houses, hills, creeks and vegetation. They are not large in size, but nevertheless manage to capture the feeling of natural scenery. The objective of re-creating hills and forests in the city is to show the poetic charm of nature, to draw people away from the maddening crowds, and provide a place where they can seek contentment and peace in nature. These different types of garden offer stability, contentment and ease – an art of living. In a sense they reflect the ancient Chinese view of life, as well as the life



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Chinese gardens as depicted by a western artist in the early nineteenth century.

styles of different strata of society, their respective approaches to life, and their aesthetic tastes.

In ancient China, from the emperor and the nobility downwards, all took pride in the ownership of a garden. In a garden one could hold court, entertain guests, hunt, play games, read, play chess, drink tea, chant verses, recite poetry or paint, and over the years a rich garden culture gradually developed. As more and more scholars and land owners started creating gardens, theoretical books on the subject began to appear. An outstanding example was the book *Craftsmanship of Gardening* by Ji Cheng (1582–?) in the Ming Dynasty. This discusses the technique of creating a garden as well as other garden-related themes and has become a key work of reference, offering an understanding of Chinese gardens. The cooperation between scholars and artisans, in both theory and technique, gives Chinese gardens their unique environmental aesthetics – part of classical Chinese culture.



PREFACE

The art of the Chinese garden emphasizes the portrayal of a mood, so that the hills, water features, plants and buildings and their spatial relationships are not just a mere materialistic environment but also evoke a spiritual atmosphere. The creator of the garden searches for a poetic mood through symbolism and allegory, often using relics, building temples, streets and even taverns, striving for an effect that is natural yet elegant, combining the art of the garden with classical Chinese literature, painting and theatre, and reflecting the true essence of traditional culture.

The classic Chinese garden, with its long artistic and cultural heritage, has also directly influenced the neighboring countries of Korea and Japan. The Japanese garden, having

its own unique national traits, has nevertheless continuously absorbed the essence of classic Chinese gardens. On the last day of December 1699, the French court welcomed the dawn of the new century with a large Chinese-style festival, and a new word, *chinoiserie*, was coined, meaning “Chinese style.” All of a sudden, Chinese ceramics, wallpaper, embroidery, garments, furniture and architecture became popular in Europe, notably in France and England. At the same time, the art of the Chinese garden spread throughout Europe, influencing mostly England and France, but also countries such as Germany, Sweden and Russia, and bringing



Stone peaks of the Ming Xuan and the half-pavilion built against the wall exhibited in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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The Summer Palace, a World Cultural Heritage site, is the largest and best-preserved imperial garden in China, and also one of Beijing's most famous scenic spots.

about a transition from geometrical gardens to gardens inspired by natural scenery.

How did the classic Chinese garden take shape and develop? How many prototypes are there in Chinese gardens, what similarities do they share, and how do they differ from each other? What experience has been accumulated through the years of garden construction, and what theories have been formed? Let us take a walk into Chinese gardens and take a closer look.



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Landscape Gardens



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The garden should be a perfect blend of nature and artifice. It should be an imitation of nature, and fully manifest the beauty of nature in a limited space; yet it is also an improvement on nature and should show the painstaking efforts of the garden designer. The Chinese garden blends man-made structures like rockeries, fish ponds and all manner of pavilions together with flowers, trees, breezes and moonlight, and combines all these into an artistic entity in which man and nature co-exist harmoniously.

The northern imperial gardens were created mainly in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), and were places where royalty could live, walk, throw banquets, entertain and hunt. They were extensive and were equipped and decorated very lavishly. The building of these gardens required large amounts of human labor and heavy investment. The gardens of southern China are concentrated mostly in cities and towns on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, which is where scholars had gathered since ancient times. This is also where writers and calligraphers chose to live in leisure so they could be close to nature, or where officials and rich merchants would show off their wealth and gamble on horses and dogs. Northern gardens are characterized by grandeur of scope, whereas southern gardens emphasize a more delicate beauty. Famous gardens are scattered all over the Chinese landscape like so many pearls, and give silent testimony to the history and culture of China.

In addition to imperial gardens and private gardens, there are also open-style scenic public areas, which contain natural mountains and water as well as features of cultural interest. These are park-like scenic areas, such as the five famous mountain ranges: the Taishan Mountains to the east, the southern Huangshan Mountains, the Songshan Mountains on the central plain, the Huashan Mountains to the west, and the northern Hengshan Mountains. After generations of development and



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Mystical and serene, Wu Ling Yuan Scenic Area in Hunan Province is idyllic.

management, these have become renowned scenic park areas. The West Lake area in Hangzhou is an even more typical example of a park-like garden.

Parks with temples are another attractive kind of garden. These so-called “Temple Parks” refer to parks associated with Buddhist, Taoist or altar temples, or with ancestral halls. The large ones are very much like imperial gardens, whereas the smaller ones are more like private gardens. These gardens, which are set in natural areas, can often be found mixed with parks and gardens of a scenic nature, or may even be a part of the scenic parks themselves. Some of the more famous Temple Parks include Beijing’s Tanzhe Temple, Jietai Temple, Taiyuan’s Jinci Temple, Suzhou’s West Garden, Hangzhou’s Lingyin Temple on the West Lake and Chengde’s Waiba (Eight Outer) Temples.



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Hunting and Communion with the Spirits

Classic Chinese gardens have a very ancient origin. According to records dating as far back as the twenty-first century BC, wild animals were already being raised and bred to provide hunting for the entertainment of kings, and such enclosures were known as “You.” The kings of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1000 BC) liked to build high platforms inside the “You” so that they could observe the skies and pay their respects to the gods. These were called “Lingtai” or spiritual platforms. They were built out of soil, and were incredibly large. In *Xinxu Cishe* it says: “King Zhou built the deer platform, which took him seven years to complete. It had a length of 3 *li* (note: 1 km=2 *li*) and a height of 1,000 *chi* (note: 1 meter = 3 *chi*), so that he could observe the clouds and rain at his pleasure.” This description seems a little exaggerated, but it is a fact that platforms built in the Shang Dynasty were very large and high.

The earliest Chinese gardens served two main functions: places for hunting, and for communion with the spirits. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770–481 BC), there were many dukes and princes, and all the small states began to compete in building palaces, chambers, gardens and platforms. An age of extravagance and hedonism was ushered in, and a change in the nature of the platforms, pavilions and gardens began to take place. Platforms, which excluded the common people in ancient times, no longer symbolized the sacred and unattainable. As the nature of the state gradually matured, and social activities such as rites, politics and daily life were increasingly sophisticated, the platforms within gardens no longer strove for size and height, but began to form a close



structural connection with the surrounding features. Primitive religion slowly dispersed, and gardens began to reveal more of the innate beauty of natural scenery, as people began to move away from the worship of supernatural powers and learned fully to enjoy and understand the beauty of nature.

The Symbol of a Unified State

In ancient times it was the traditional belief that the powers of the rulers were bestowed by the gods. Since the power of the emperor came from heaven, the emperor was known as the “Son of Heaven.” The Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) overthrew six smaller states and unified the country, and was later superseded by an even stronger totalitarian Han Dynasty (206 BC– 220 AD). This was the beginning of 2,000 consecutive years of a unified state with centralized power. The establishment of this form of state government marks a turning point in Chinese history. The influence of this historic period on the art of gardening was also deep and profound.

From historic annals dating from the Qin and Han Dynasties, we find many records of large-scale architectural building and garden construction over a period of roughly 400 years. In 221 BC, the Emperor Qinshihuang unified the



Portrait of Qinshihuang, China's first Emperor.



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country and set up a vast feudal empire. He ordered 200,000 rich families to move to Xianyang in Shaanxi Province in order to centralize manpower and resources so he could implement his ambitious construction plan. Qin Dynasty palaces were extremely large. The most famous Qin Dynasty palace is E-fang Palace, which was built south of Xianyang, then the capital. The “Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin” in the *Records of the Grand Historian* contains the following passage: “...the front palace of E-fang is 500 paces from east to west, and 50 *zhang* (note: one *zhang* equals ten feet) from south to north. It is large enough to hold ten thousand people and tall enough to erect a five-*zhang* banner.” Emperor Qinshihuang used the Xianyang Palace as the center, around which he planned, in a radius of scores of miles, to build over 200 palaces and chambers, all to be mutually connected by passageways above the ground. This would have made this whole region both his palace and his garden. This extravagant plan, however, was never completed. The Qin Dynasty only lasted fifteen years, and the dream of Emperor Qinshihuang of building an empire that would last down the ages went up in flames with the fire that razed E-fang Palace. It is said that the fire raged for three months before the E-fang Palace was finally burned down to the ground.

After the fall of the Qin Empire, the former capital of Xianyang fell into ruins. The Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–25 AD) set up its capital in the city of Chang’an, which lies to the southeast of Xianyang. The palaces of the Western Han were also very large in scope. Of the palaces in Chang’an, the Changle Palace and Weiyang Palace alone took up one third of the whole area of the city. If you include some of the smaller palaces such as Gui Palace, Bei (North) Palace and Mingguang Palace, the area occupied by palaces accounted for over half of the whole city, which covered thirty-six square kilometers. This is over twenty

