

ART AND
ARCHITECTURE
IN SUZHOU
GARDENS

Art and Architecture in Suzhou Gardens

Chen Lixian



YILIN PRESS

(蘇)新登字第 008 號

責任編輯：顧愛彬

責任美編：洪佩奇

版式設計：顧曉軍

書 名 蘇州園林建築藝術
編 著 者 陳勵先

出版發行 譯 林 出 版 社
地 址 南京中央路 165 號(郵政編碼：210009)
經 銷 江蘇省新華書店
印 刷 者 蘇州印刷總廠

開 本 787×1092 毫米 1/12
字 數 140 千字
印 張 11 插頁 32
印 數 1—1200 冊
版 次 1992 年 7 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷

ISBN 7-80567-170-2/J·25

04500

FOREWORD

If a visitor to a garden in Suzhou or anywhere else for that matter, after entering and before wandering too far, should pause and by glimpses transcend space and volume and condense the whole into one flat surface, he would be thrilled to realize how closely its design resembles a painting. Before his eyes stands a landscape, not an effort of the painter's brush, but a composition of arbor, brook and weeping willows unmistakably recalling the familiar pattern which one associates with a Chinese painting—a crooked path, a hazardous bridge, and a cramped opening to a grotto. The visitor could well be satisfied with this much and turn away, leaving the landscape beyond as new discoveries and new surprises for another day. For this reason, the past owner of a Chinese garden seldom lived in it and only occasionally paid it a visit. Well worth preserving is the distance that lends enchantment.

The old-school critic maintained that only a good painter could design a good garden. Incidentally, two centuries ago in England, this dictum was echoed by William Shenstone when he asserted that a landscapist was the best garden designer. An ideal combination was found in the Tang poet-painter Wang Wei (王維 699-759 A. D.) who designed his own garden to beguile his remaining years. One scholar summed up Wang Wei's genius in these words: "His poetry suggests painting, and his painting, poetry." The relation between painting and gardening is so close that the one hardly ends when the other begins.

Unusual indeed it is when one finds a garden without architecture. Basic and ubiquitous are arbors or gazebos. These toylike buildings can even stand on a single post, or take the plan form of a triangle, a circle, any polygon, double square, interlocked circles of a cross. Their top covering ranges from simple pyramids to gable and half-hip roofs. A sizable structure, the pillared and rather lofty hall, occupying a key position, is the

accent of any garden composition and preferably open on all four sides with removable latticed windows. The hall has its own raised terrace or roomy pavement. A den, on the other hand, is best given a secluded spot. Another feature in garden architecture is corridors or covered ways. A colonnaded corridor mainly serves to connect buildings, or, if standing between two courts, to divide and unite them by virtue of its openness and unobstructiveness. Wherever desirable to separate two courts entirely, it can be walled up, decorated with tracéried windows which are regularly spaced.

Besides the garden architecture, one tends to find rockeries—a queer object, peculiar to Chinese gardens, half natural and half artistically treated—as transition from artifact to nature. And as a garden feature, absolutely unique in the world, most rockeries were brought from a distance, sometimes hundreds of miles away. One of the highly prized varieties is "lake stone," quarried from deep water. The home of lake stones being near, people in Suzhou were able to accumulate a large quantity of "lake stone." With rockery supply rather plentiful, the task of garden making in Suzhou as a result was rendered comparatively simple and economical. Without these lake stones, Suzhou gardens would not have sustained such an irresistible appeal.

Yet all these features belong to a different school of thought entirely compatible with ancient Chinese philosophy. Straight walks, long avenues and well-balanced parterres result from the Occidental mathematical mind, which China's orthodox philosophers would consider to be of stiff orderliness and geometrical rigidity. No gardens should be one in which from any given point the entire scenery is visible at a glance. In addition, care should be taken to achieve contrast through open to closed space, dark to bright spots, high to low openings and big to small surface or volume. To make possible myriad vistas and various centers of

interest, not only walks are curved, but grounds are often made irregular in contour so that vision is confined to a little at a time. Not so in European gardens, whose open arrangement and far-reaching view had bored people so much that mazes and labyrinths had to be invented to satisfy the curious and the wayward. And to compensate linear monotony, little secret gardens had been plotted amongst groves in Versailles.

The Chinese garden is nothing but a garden of deception; a wonderland of fantastic dreams come true and a little world of make-believe. If an Oriental philosopher were not troubled by the inaccessibility to this arbor or that hill in a painting, he would surely seldom find it imperative to demand otherwise in a garden.

A unique feature in Chinese gardens is the close association with literature. No buildings in a garden is complete without tablets or plaques bearing inscriptions written by well-known poets or scholars. Such inscriptions call for skill both in wording

and calligraphy, and are constantly found in a hall, a pavilion, or over a gateway. Every building is invariably christened an individual and appropriate name.

Chinese classical gardens, like antique Chinese paintings and other traditional arts, are in danger of being relegated to be mere archaeological relics if allowed to go their own way uncared for. Many famed gardens would have gone into oblivion had not timely measures been taken to come to their rescue.

Thanks to Professor Liu Dunzheng, former head of the Department of Architecture of Southeast University, whose work *Chinese Classical Gardens in Suzhou* had excited my great love for those splendid gardens in Suzhou when I was translating it into English; to Mr. Zhu Jiabao, a photographer, for offering some of his photos. To my late parents I am deeply grateful for their sincere help, either in having bettered my English or in having made me better understand music in architecture.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

I INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL SURVEY

CHAPTER TWO

7 POETRY AND ILLUSION IN ROCKERIES AND PAVILIONS

CHAPTER THREE

63 WATER AREAS AS PART OF SCENERY

CHAPTER FOUR

75 MAGICAL TOUCHES IN THE GARDEN LAYOUT

CHAPTER FIVE

89 SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

APPENDICES

121 A TABLE OF BUILDINGS IN SUZHOU GARDENS WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION

124 SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

125 PHOTOGRAPHS

CHAPTER ONE

**INTRODUCTION AND
HISTORICAL SURVEY**

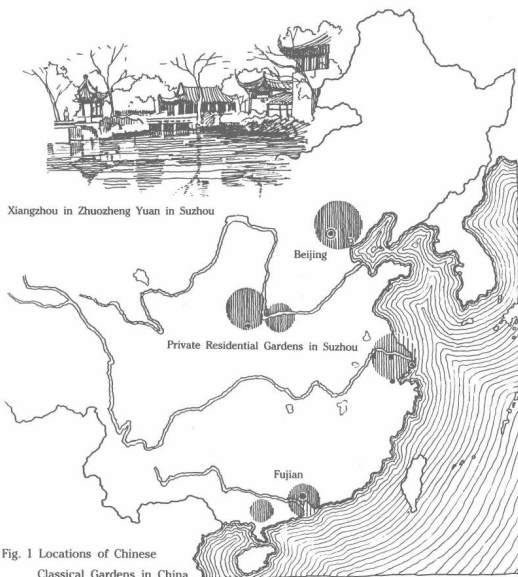


Fig. 1 Locations of Chinese
Classical Gardens in China.



CHINESE CLASSICAL GARDENS have attained a very high artistic level in gardening and pavilion architecture, with a unique style all their own. They occupy an important place in the historical development of gardening and pavilion architecture throughout the world; they not only had much influence upon gardening in Japan but also had an impact upon parks and gardens in Western Europe, especially in England, in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Chinese classical gardens may be divided into two main types: on the one hand, there are the imperial palaces and parks and, on the other hand, there are the private residential gardens of high-ranking officials, big land-owners and wealthy merchants. The imperial palaces and parks, such as *Yihe Yuan* (The Summer Palace 颐和园) in Beijing, are usually located in the suburbs, built on a grand scale and often taking up several thousand acres of land. But some imperial parks are built inside the capital, right next to the imperial residences, such as the North Sea Park in Beijing. These parks are also fairly large.

The private residential gardens are usually built within city limits, next to the residences. They are generally of smaller size, from one or two acres of land to seventy or eighty acres, at most. The garden scenery depends chiefly upon an arrangement of small spaces within short distances, with emphasis on the imitation of nature, sometimes aiming at an improvement on nature with poetic imagination and pictorial embellishments. There is a winding and irregular arrangement of pavilions, halls and corridors. Hills, ponds, flowers and trees are placed freely about. These gardens are thus different from the regular, geometrical pattern common to gardens in Europe. Another difference is that all Chinese classical gardens contain buildings (Fig. 1).

However, whether in the imperial palaces and parks or in private residential gardens, there are always numerous architectural units arranged in the form of courtyards or sets of buildings. These units are linked with corridors and decorated with streamlets and ponds, hillocks and rocks, trees and flowers, and meadows and shrubs. The entire garden is built in different architectural styles typical of our national architectural characteristics. The classical gardens in Suzhou contain representative

specimens of pavilion architecture in South China. Those gardens that have been preserved are priceless treasures in our cultural heritage.

Suzhou is located in the southeastern part of China, south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze, the longest river in the country. It is a medium-sized city of over one million people. (Fig. 2) It is "the land of rice and fish" and has always been one of the richest places in China, with a very temperate climate throughout most of the year. A Chinese proverb goes: "Above is paradise, below we have Suzhou and Hangzhou." Hangzhou is one of the most beautiful cities, with its West Lake and charming surrounding hills. Suzhou is equally beautiful, with its many Venice-like canals and, particularly, with its numerous gardens of typical Oriental flavour. Today, there are more than a dozen big and small private gardens preserved and open to the public. So Suzhou is a "must" for tourists to China.

According to historical records, the earliest gardens in Suzhou dated back to the East Jing Dynasty at about the 4th century. The Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 A. D.) was a period of economic prosperity and cultural progress in our history, and a few more gardens were built. But, in the last decades of the Tang Dynasty and in the period of the Five Dynasties (907 - 960 A. D.), the whole district around Suzhou was touched little by war and became the most prosperous part of China. The city was chosen as the suitable place for building gardens by aristocrats, officials, and rich merchants. *Canglang Ting* (Surging Waves Pavilion 沧浪亭), the oldest garden preserved today in Suzhou, was rebuilt several times at its original site in the past centuries. In the last years of the North Song Dynasty (960 - 1127 A. D.), many gardens were built in Suzhou. In the South Song Dynasty (1127-1279 A. D.), under the corrupt rule of several emperors, one after another, the prosperous city of Suzhou became a place where many private residential gardens and parks were built for the royal family and other high officials, not only inside the city, but also in some scenic spots in the suburbs. There are three following dynasties: the Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368 A. D.), the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644 A. D.), and the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1911 A. D.). During the three hundred years from the mid-15th to mid-18th century (from the time of Emperor Jiajing of the Ming

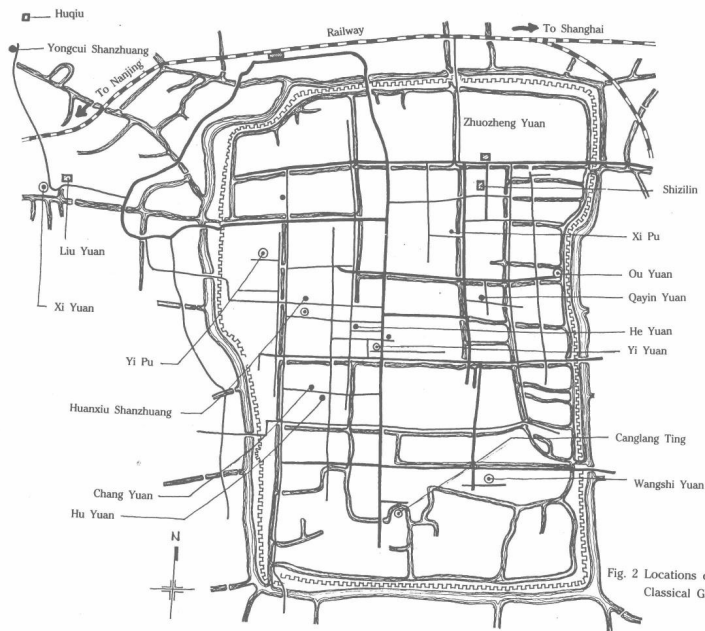


Fig. 2 Locations of Principal Classical Gardens in Suzhou.

Dynasty to that of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty), the building of gardens reached a new height of development. In the late 19th century, following the failure of the Taiping Heavenly Uprising, many officials and generals gained great wealth from the war. They came to Suzhou to build their private residences and gardens, leading to another high tide for pavilion archi-

tecture in Suzhou. Through the centuries, many gardens in Suzhou were built and then destroyed, rebuilt, and again partly destroyed. Beginning in 1953, rebuilding or renovation was begun at numerous well-known gardens and parks; now, quite a few of them are open to the public for sight-seeing.

CHAPTER TWO

**POETRY AND ILLUSION IN
ROCKERIES AND PAVILIONS**

ROCKERIES

ARTIFICIAL HILLS, also called rockeries, are most important in Suzhou gardens. They are the most typical element in these gardens and are especially famous in Suzhou.

In the construction of Chinese gardens, where natural landscape has ever been the thing to strive for, the device of piling rocks to form rockeries may be traced back to the early period of the West Han Dynasty. Technical advances in that field continued through the East Han Dynasty to the era of the Three Kingdoms. According to a record in the *History of the Late Han Dynasty* (《後漢書》), a man named Liang Ji built many gardens and parks, in which earth was piled up for the construction of hillocks. Within a distance of five km., nine hillocks were amassed to resemble the two Yao hills, where thick groves and seemingly inaccessible ravines gave the visitors an impression of finding themselves amidst wild nature. During the Wei Dynasty in the era of the Three Kingdoms, *Fangling Yuan* (Fragrant Grove Garden 芳林園) was described as containing the wonders of "nine ravines and eight brooks." These records show that Chinese gardens built in the Han and the Wei Dynasties were no longer constructed simply in imitation of nature, but that, within limited space, artificial specimens modelled on natural hills were created to suit the fancies of the garden owners. In the West Jin and East Jin Dynasties and later in the South and North Dynasties, high officials and intellectuals became absorbed in the study of metaphysics. They strove for artifices and freedom from all restraints, in order to find "escape from the realities of life." They adored strange-shaped rocks and considered it "refinement" to give free vent to their sentiments in the surroundings of gardens and hills and rills. As a result, it became the vogue to find delight in fanciful reproductions of wild nature in the gardens built at the time. Thus, this synthesis and abstraction of natural hills and rills gradually evolved upon the groundwork of gardening in the Han and Wei Dynasties. Later, in the Tang and Song Dynasties, further advances were made in the country's economic and cultural development. Not only were more

gardens built, but much experience was gained in the art of gardening, both in theory and in practice. At the same time, with the impact of paintings, the piling of rocks into hillocks gradually acquired their peculiar resemblances to those hills and rills in classical Chinese water-colour paintings. It became an important architectural device in the art of gardening in China through the centuries. Such rockeries, constructed in a great variety of shapes and demonstrating high creativity in style, rarely find their parallels in the gardens of other countries of the world. This was possible because the Chinese garden-building artisans of the past, from their frequent contacts with various phenomena in wild nature, had gained indelible impressions of the external appearances of hills and precipices as well as caves and ravines. They well knew the composition of various kinds of rocks and the special features of earth compounded with stones. It was only after they had had such a comprehensive knowledge of gardening and repeated practices in actual construction that they were able to create garden scenery that was at once majestic and grotesque, towering and steep, dim and deep, on the same plane and in perspective.

Suzhou gardens are located mostly within the city limits. Owing to the limited garden space and other restricting circumstances, different techniques are used for the piling of rockeries in different gardens. For the very small-sized gardens, a few peaked rocks are usually placed in the courtyards, either behind or in front of the parlour or study in the family residence. Rocks are heaped to form hillocks, stone precipices are built to project from the walls, or a few lake stones are embedded beside some small pool. In slightly larger but still fairly small gardens, the compound attached to the residence may be bigger in size, yet the arrangement of rocks still cannot be very complicated. There, a pool generally serves as the centre of attraction, while rocks are placed as foil either to the pool or to the halls, flowers and trees; or an earthen mound or natural hillside is utilized to plant trees and flowers in the garden; or an artificial rockery is piled to serve as the major scenery. In a medium-sized garden there are usually both a hillock and a pool, forming several scenic areas together with the halls, pavilions, flowers and trees. Within the major scenic area are constructed some hilly ranges

and ravines, in imitation of natural hills. In some other gardens, steep precipices and overhanging cliffs, or wavy embankments that rise and fall in uneven heights are built beside the pools, while projecting rocks and fishing nooks are placed so as to bring the water in the pools closer to the hillocks. Given large-sized rockeries, in order to provide one with a wider field of vision, pavilions of one or two storeys are generally built atop them. Thus, the scenic objects both within the garden and beyond are brought into view. A hillock can divide a garden into several scenic areas, while simultaneously providing favourable conditions for creating a quieter atmosphere, reducing heat, and keeping away dust. In a garden layout, it is common to build a rockery and plant a grove of trees on one side of a pool, while on the other side to randomly place halls, lounges, pavilions and waterside pavilions. Thus, one may stand on the hill and look beyond the clear water in the pool to the buildings of irregular heights in the distance, or one may stay in a hall or pavilion and watch the rocky precipices, flowers and trees on the other side of the pool (Fig. 3). In both cases you get the wonderful effect of opposite scenes vis-a-vis each other. You also have the excellent impression of contrast from the buildings and the hillock facing each other at a distance. In the extremely large gardens, the piling of rockeries, rocky peaks or rocky precipices, or of just a few rocks, depends on the size of the scenic area or courtyards in which they are located. It is possible to construct several rockeries in a scenic area, placing them near one another, to look like a chain of hills. This divides the garden into several parts, so that the garden scenery seems at once separable and merged together. One gets the feeling of tortuosity and depth for the entire scenery. In short, from the general layout of a garden to the arrangement of separate areas in it, from the heaping of rocks to form rockeries to the placing of a few lake stones in some small area, there are many peculiar devices and styles created in Suzhou gardens. Some of the innovations attain a high level of artistic excellence.

Types of Artificial Hills

The artificial hills in Chinese classical gardens are generally of three kinds: earth hillocks, hillocks of earth and rocks, and rocky

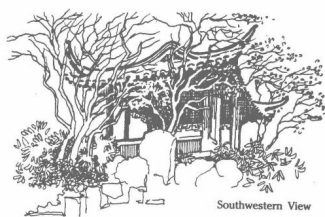
hillocks or rockeries. Of the three, earth hillocks date back to farthest, followed by earth and rock hillocks. These two kinds have their advantages. It is easier to find the necessary material for them, it is easier to build, it takes less labour, material and time. And it is also easier to plant trees and flowers thereon, thus taking less time to make the entire area look like a real garden. For these reasons the first two kinds of hillocks are the most common. As for the third kind, the rocky hillocks or rockeries, they are much more complicated in structure, process of construction, artistic modelling, the planting of trees and flowers, and in the arrangement of the surroundings. It requires more labour, more expenses and more time to quarry the rocks, transport them and pile them up. Of course, to construct caves and gullies, to build cliffs and precipices or to pile up rather high rockeries within small spaces, it is necessary to employ rocks for the job. Piling up a hillock with earth is not easy. To pile it up high would require much space and its shape would appear too cumbersome. It can hardly create a graceful, towering appearance. However, by using earth, it would be easier to plant trees and flowers. Therefore, the use of a hillock with both rocks and earth becomes the inevitable technical and artistic requirement. In the 400 years since the latter part of the Ming Dynasty, pavilion gardens south of the Yangtze River have used most hillocks with both rocks and earth. Those hills built entirely of earth without a single rock are usually limited to only a part of the hillock, as in the case of the northwestern corner of *Xuexiang Yunwei Ting* (Pavilion of Fragrant Snow and Azure Clouds 雪香雲蔚亭) in *Zhuozheng Yuan* (The Humble Administrator's Garden 拙政園) (Fig. 4). Hillocks with both earth and rocks, the second kind, may be subdivided into two kinds: (a) those with more earth and few rocks and (b) those with more rocks and little earth. A great majority belong to this latter kind, which may be subdivided into three types, based on structure.

Type 1: The lower skirts of the hillock as well as the numerous caves and caverns in it are all built of stones, while the layer of earth on its top is rather thin. The rockery in *Shizilin* (Lion Grove Garden 獅子林) belongs to this type.

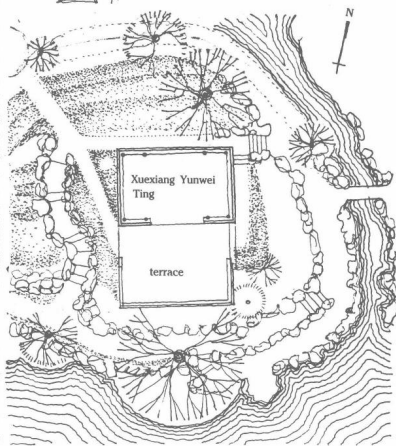
Type 2: Though the cliffs and the caves are made of stone, caves are few, and the layer of earth on the top of the hillock and



Southeastern View of Xuexiang Yunwei Ting



Southwestern View



Plan

Fig. 4 Northwestern Corner of Xuexiang Yunwei Ting in Zhuozheng Yuan.