

# Classical Private Gardens of China



Yilin Press

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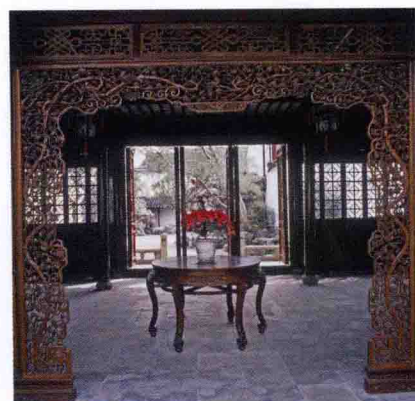
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# PREFACE





>>>To build a garden is to build a paradise. As the tangible expression of wonder, gardens are intended to be peaceful retreats and resting places for the soul. Standing in the gardens, we not only see pavilions, pagodas, terraces, mountains, water, flowers and grass, but also sense what Chinese people of centuries past appreciated and believed. From Taoism they took the concept of letting things take their own course, so they imitated the natural flow of rivers and lakes. From the philosopher Confucius they absorbed a sense of idealism, and they built their ideals into the mountains and hills. From Buddhism they learned the practice of meditation, so they planted linden trees to provide spots for Zen reflection. Out of respect for their cultural traditions, they embedded stone inscriptions in corridor walls, thus keeping the wisdom of their ancestors close.



>>>Whether on a bright spring day or a cool autumn night, people would gather to enjoy the company of family and friends, to compose poems, admire paintings and exchange views; they might listen to songs, play chess, or meet their lovers under the moon. Imagining these scenes, we can better appreciate the poetic sensibilities of the garden artists who created these urban mountains and forests.

>>>The Yangtze River Delta, so richly endowed with natural beauty and abundant resources, has been blessed with prosperity and wealth for over one thousand years. During the 14th—19th centuries, this area was home to intellectuals and rich merchants who strongly influenced Chinese culture. Here they built gardens to express their attitude toward life and to contend with one another for prestige. These private gardens, with their unique features, typify the tradition of Chinese classical gardens.

>>>This book introduces readers to the history and aesthetics of classical private gardens through words and photographs. In addition, this book offers a collection of commentaries to help us appreciate the life, ideals, thoughts and feelings of their creators.

>>>The beauty of classical Chinese gardens is different from that of Western gardens. Where the Chinese gardens evoke the essence of nature, the great gardens of the West reproduce nature based on principles of order and rationality. This contrast encourages us to reflect on the infinite possibilities of beauty. Be it eye-pleasing Western gardens or mind-pleasing oriental gardens, classical gardens or modern gardens, people unceasingly seek and create beauty based on their imagining about paradise.

>>>This book is dedicated to garden builders of all ages.

# INTRODUCTION





As works of art, gardens are created by human beings for relaxation and sightseeing. Like architecture, gardens are closely associated with people's daily life. Originating from about the same time in the history of mankind, architecture and gardens supplement each other. However, there is a marked difference between the two: the former has been put up completely by humans, while the latter has retained a considerable proportion of natural elements, such as trees, grass, fountains, rocks, all of which are full of the rich flavor of raw nature. As nations and regions in the world vary in their cultural backgrounds, people have different perspectives and preferences for landscape, thus giving rise to gardens of various traits and styles.

The Chinese have always had a cultural tradition of loving Nature and gardens. Throughout history, numerous men of letters expressed their immense admiration for beautiful gardens in their poems and paintings. Almost all the artists, painters, writers, and poets who left an indelible mark on China's art history had some connection with gardens, which provided them with a pleasant environment for their living and artistic creation. In return their works about gardens promoted the further development of classical gardens in China. The two complement each other, thus enabling traditional Chinese art to flourish continuously.

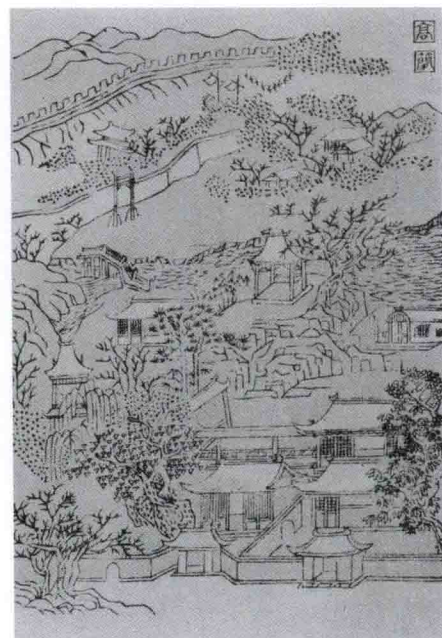
Just like other forms of traditional Chinese art, classical gardens in China have evolved a variety of styles and types in history. A common way of classification is based on their users: royal gardens, private gardens, monastic gardens, and public gardens in the suburbs.

By making use of rocks, flowers, trees and so on, the garden builders have tried to beautify the environment through their ingenious conception. It is human nature to seek beauty, and in this sense, gardens are a spontaneous and popular form of art to some extent. Both high-ranking officials and the populace have attempted to build gardens within their own power. Among the classical gardens which have been preserved to the present, private gardens are the most widespread, the greatest in number, and also the most representative.

Depending on the owners' wealth, education, and aesthetic taste, private gardens differ tremendously in their scale and artistry. For example, aristocrats love to copy the royal gardens and strive for splendor; rich merchants vie for luxury in their gardens; scholars exhibit their interest in poetry and painting;

■ Cang Lang Garden (Blue Waves Garden, Suzhou)

Quoted from Tong Juan, *A Record of Gardens in the Yangtze River Delta*



common people plant flowers and trees in their small courtyards.

Of these gardens the ones with great artistic accomplishment and high historic value are those scholarly gardens created by people of learning. Retired bureaucrats with an encyclopedic mind, scholars who turned to business after frustration in the imperial examinations, poverty-stricken men of letters, all could produce exquisite gardens. The classical gardens we see today are mostly of this type.

The gardens in the Yangtze River Delta have been the most famous among the private gardens in China. Their origin may be traced back to the Jin Dynasty (265–420), which was among the darkest and most chaotic periods in Chinese history. Under the merciless force of social reality, people resorted to Taoism which advocates keeping a distance from reality and returning to nature. The hermitic way of life—having plenty of free time, doing nothing against nature, enjoying leisure and being carefree—became extremely popular among scholars at that time. They were keen on meditating in remote places with mountains and waters, talking about metaphysics, and priding themselves on doing nothing in vulgar pursuit of wealth or power. Such a movement dedicated to seeking beauty in nature through meditation greatly influenced the Chinese garden aesthetics.

Under these circumstances, the scholarly gardens arose as times required. They were different from the all-embracing imperial gardens of



- 1 1 Crane Raising Pavilion in a Qing Dynasty (1616–1911) painting
- 2 2 A residential garden in a Qing Dynasty (1616–1911) painting



the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). They were also different from those grand gardens of the rich and powerful people. Instead, they were primarily intended as a cozy place for study, academic salons, and relaxation. Therefore these gardens had a fresh style of simplicity, featuring natural scenery rather than splendid buildings, and they mushroomed and became a fashion among the educated people in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

Then in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), there was a rapid economic growth in the Yangtze River Delta, which became the most prosperous region in the whole country. With fast economic development, more and more gardens were built in the area. Besides, quite a number of relegated and retired officials went to settle down in the area, and they joined in the trend of garden building too.

With local characteristics, these gardens distinguished themselves by incorporating waters, bamboos, willows, and lotus flowers in their scenery. Some of them erected rockeries with stones from the nearby Taihu Lake, thus initiating a new fashion. The overall styles and specific methods of creating scenery became more and more varied. It was in this period that the Master of Fishing Nets Garden, which is a classic among the private gardens in Suzhou, was built.

The Ming and the Qing dynasties (1368–1644; 1616–1911) witnessed the heyday of the private gardens in the Yangtze River Delta. A large number of gardens were built over a vast area, thus setting off an upsurge of private garden construction. Since the mid-Ming Dynasty, handicraft industry and commerce flourished in the region. As a result the urban population doubled and the forms of public entertainment proliferated. In addition to fiction, drama, woodcut and others, gardens continued their popularity and became an inseparable part of urban life. Gardens were not only for men of letters to express themselves and derive intellectual enjoyment, but they were also gradually transformed into popular resorts for all.

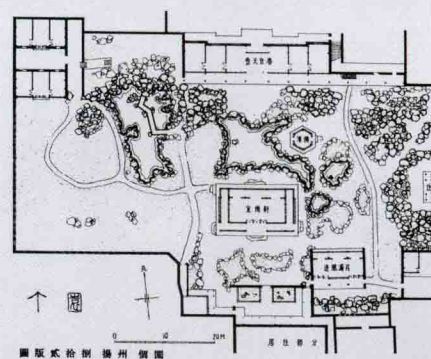
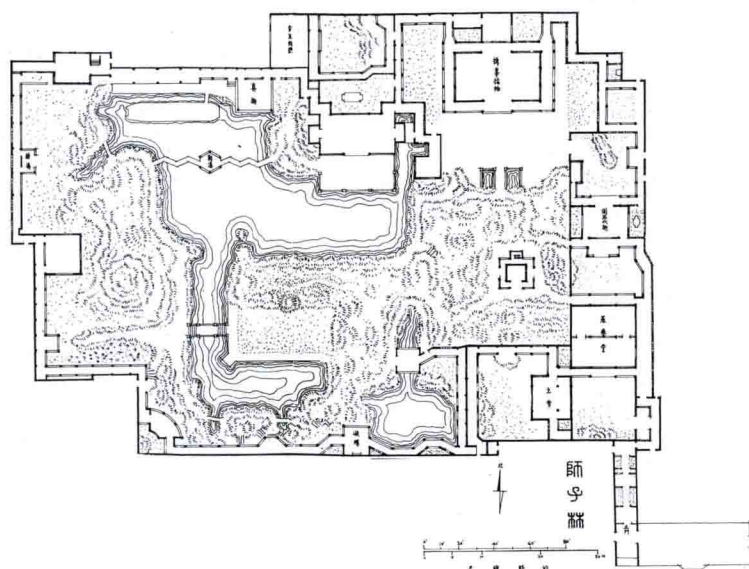
Another feature in the development of private gardens during the Ming and the Qing dynasties is the advancement of theoretical studies and building skills. In the planning stage, greater attention was paid to the layout and its cultural conception, and to the absorption of the quintessence of other traditional Chinese art forms. With the joint efforts of numerous garden architects and builders, private gardens reached their

zenith in this period. Many of them were favoured by emperors and even became the model for the royal gardens at that time. Today in the imperial gardens such as the Summer Palace in Beijing, and the Summer Resorts in Chengde, Hebei Province, people may easily notice many scenes resembling those of the gardens in the Yangtze River Delta.

As garden building became extremely popular and lasted for quite a long period, professional teams of workmen skilled in garden building emerged. Previously, garden building and other construction projects were mixed up without any clear distinction, but in the Ming Dynasty workmen specialized in making rockeries and planting flowers gradually gained their professional independence. They were known as “flower gardeners.” Rockery craftsmen, in particular, required a good understanding of traditional Chinese painting as well as technical mastery of various skills. Today we can still appreciate many wonderful rockeries from the Ming and Qing dynasties. These rockeries, especially the ones done by masters such as Zhang Nanyang and Ge Yuliang, display accomplished skills and vivid fakery just like real mountains.

In general, the classical private gardens in the Yangtze River Delta bear some typical features:

1. “To make a mountain out of a molehill,” and “to pit a few against many.” In terms of location most private gardens were joined to the residences or mansions. Others were situated in the suburban scenic spots with hills and waters, and were chiefly intended to be villas for appreciating flowers in spring, escaping heat in summer, and enjoying the



2 3  
1

- 1 The floor plan of the Shi Zi Lin Garden (Lions Grove, Suzhou), by Tong Juan in the 1930s
- 2 The floor plan of the Ge Garden (Individuality Garden, Yangzhou), by Tong Juan in the 1930s
- 3 Town views and small courtyards in a Qing Dynasty painting



full moon in autumn.

As a rule, private gardens often did not occupy a large area. The big ones covered two or three acres, while the small ones less than an acre. This was reflected even in the names of the gardens. For example, one garden was called the “Kettle Garden,” indicating that it was small and shaped like a kettle. A small area constituted a disadvantage for garden building. However, ancient garden architects made good use of it and took great pains in the design and layout, creating many scenes in the limited space. All the scenes in a garden, either rockeries or ponds, pavilions or covered bridges, even a corner in the courtyard, were all small and exquisite. Their location and arrangement were endlessly debated, so as to make the whole scene simple but vigorous, concise yet comprehensive.

2. The second feature is that they are full of scholarly flavor. The more noble the owners' thought, the more poetic their gardens. At the initial stage of the construction, the way they worked out the blueprint was similar to humming verses or composing essays. Mr. Qian Yong, a garden critic in the Qing Dynasty, observed that the construction of scholarly gardens and the creation of literary works had something in common. He commented, “Building a garden is the same as writing a poem or an essay. The windings should follow a pattern, and different parts should echo one another. Monotony and disorder should be absolutely shunned.”





Strolling about a good scholarly garden, one will never miss the literary core in the picturesque scenery. Every rockery, pond, tree, flower, and pavilion seems to have been considered time and again, just as every word in a poem has to be weighed, so that everything is in the right place in the garden, which has been turned into a touching poem of landscape. For instance, in the Master of Fishing Nets Garden in Suzhou, there is a study with a courtyard, the Late Spring Abode, acclaimed as the cream of China's classical gardens. It was duplicated in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The duplicate, named Astor's Court, has enchanted numerous visitors with its elegant style and exquisite workmanship.

3. The third feature is that these gardens are both elegant and simplistic. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, “elegance” primarily refers to tranquility, naturalness, purity, freshness, peace and grace; “simplicity” means unaffectedness, plainness, and nothing flamboyant, frivolous, or superfluous. The elegance and simplicity of the private gardens are owing to the fact that they pit a few against many, and simplicity against superfluity.

The private gardens are mainly places for people to relax, to rest, to achieve mental tranquility, and to study. Therefore the scenes in these gardens are usually refined, quiet, natural and refreshing, seldom with anything showy. Most buildings in the gardens have grey tiles and white walls; the wood decorations are often dark brown. The bases of terraces and floors are paved with grey bricks or stones, or even with plain pebbles, or broken bricks and tiles; their patterns are mostly lattices, flowers or plant leaves. The interior displays are chiefly classic works of art. Even the inscribed boards and the couplets carved on the pillars are also simple and graceful, in complete coordination with the gardens' style.

Making clever and full use of the landscape is the fourth feature of classical private gardens. Their layout and creation of scenes do not conform to conventions. They build up their own characteristics out of the local conditions. They do not seek perfection or comprehensiveness. Instead they try to give prominence to their particular themes and individual characters. According to *A Record of Gardens in Wuxing* by Zhou Mi (1232–1298), some gardens were noted for their ancient and precious woods, others for their ponds, still others for their ingenious rocks or fountains and waterfalls. Another example is the gardens in Suzhou, each of which boasts its own character. The Humble Administrator's Garden excels



■ A bird's-eye view of the Yi Garden (Joyous Garden), Suzhou



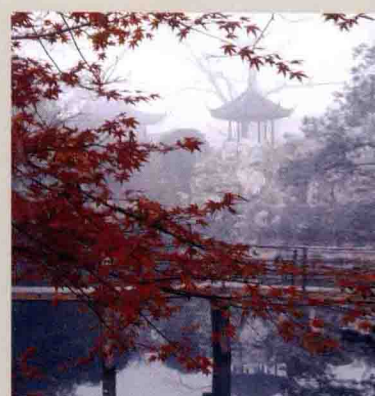
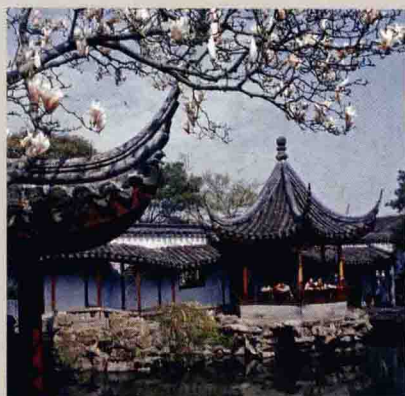


in water scenery with a style of simplicity, openness, and naturalness. The Master of Fishing Nets Garden is exquisite, deep and serene, with a tightly-knit layout and an endless array of views. The Blue Waves Pavilion looks ancient and tranquil, with rich scenes of forested hills and wild nature.


4. The last but not the least feature of classical private gardens is that within a relatively small space they closely combine the function of sightseeing with that of housing, thus achieving the unity between “touring” and “living.” In ancient China, visiting the mountains, waters, forests, and fountains was known as “touring,” while reading, studying, drinking tea and having banquets were called “living.” And the garden art was not perfect unless these two functions were both well realized.

China is a country rich in tourist resources. The breath-taking scenery at the famous mountains and waters intoxicated numerous writers and artists. Therefore visiting these scenic spots became a fashion. However, quite few people were willing to live there like hermits. In other words, people would like to appreciate the beauty of nature without giving up the sensuous enjoyments of the urban life. This problem was creatively solved by constructing private gardens in the vicinity of urban residences. In addition, the changable climate and the astronomical phenomena were also taken into account in designing gardens. Lotuses in breezes, bamboos in rain, plum blossoms covered by snow, a pond reflecting the full moon, all these scenes would be impossible without the right weather. To provide shelter from rain and heat, semi-open structures were created such as pavilions, balconies and covered walkways.

In conclusion, the creators of classical private gardens managed to reach a perfect integration of nature and culture, catering to people's needs for both the beauty of the great nature and the comforts of urban life. This is probably the root cause why private gardens flourished in ancient China.

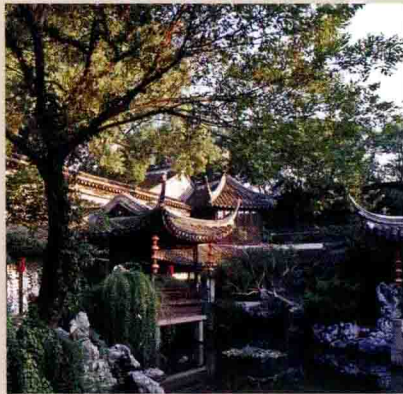






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