

Lou Qingxi

CHINESE GARDENS

In Search of Landscape Paradise

Translated by Zhang Lei and Yu Hong



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
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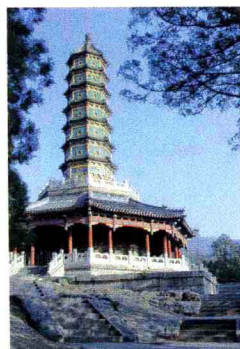
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Preface

Walking into a Chinese garden, one cannot help but be enchanted by its unique oriental flavor; and walking in an atmosphere of tranquility and peace, one will discover something unlikely to be found in Western architecture—delicate and refined, complex and contained in its quietude. In contrast with natural scenery, the beauty of Chinese gardens lies in their combining culture and art into one. In northern imperial gardens, natural scenes with bridges, creeks and winding paths are interspersed with magnificent palatial architectural groups, fully exemplifying the royal dignity, the most typical of those still existing being the Summer Palace in Beijing. In contrast, private gardens south of the Yangtze River, such as the Lingering Garden, the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Master-of-Nets Garden, play upon their hills, rivers and naturally rich vegetation and achieve a charm not to be found in Northern gardens. These gardens typically belong to government officials, merchants and scholars, serving as part of their private residence, combining living quarters, reception halls and studies with a fascinating array of pavilions, corridors, terrace houses, hills, creeks and vegetation, not large in size but intent on capturing 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 to seek contentment and peace in nature. These gardens of different nature exemplify a life of stability, contentment and ease, an art of living so to speak. In a sense they reflect the ancient Chinese view of life, of the universe, and the life styles of





Chinese gardens painted by Western painters in early years of the 19th century

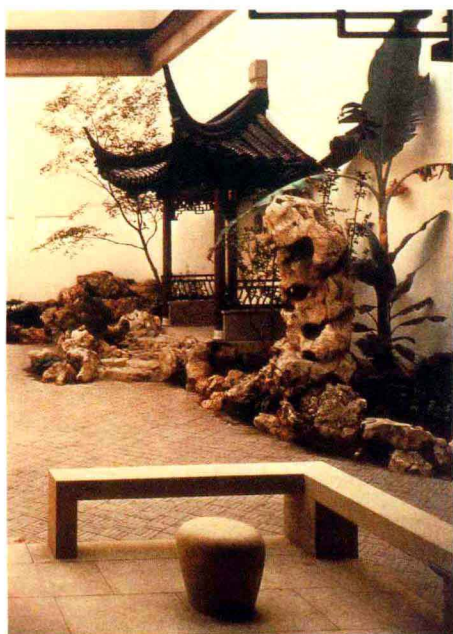
different strata of society and their respective approaches to life, and aesthetic tastes.

In ancient China, from the emperor down to any of the rich, they without exception all took pride in the ownership of a garden in their living space. In the 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 was gradually formed. As more and more scholars and garden owners started participating in the making of gardens, theoretical books on garden building appeared. An outstanding example was the book *Craftsmanship of Gardening* by Ji Cheng (1582–?) in the Ming Dynasty, which discusses the technique of creating a garden as well as garden-related knowledge, experience with garden construction and theories on creating a garden - this book has become a key for people today for an understanding of the Chinese garden concepts. And



it is because of the cooperation between scholars and artisans in both theory and technique that the art of the Chinese garden, exemplifying unique Chinese environmental aesthetics, has evolved into a specimen of the classical Chinese culture.

The art of the Chinese garden emphasizes the portrayal of a mood, so that the hills, waters, plants, and buildings as well as their spatial relationship are not just a mere materialistic environment but also evoke a spiritual atmosphere. The builder of the garden, through symbolism and allegories, the search for a poetic mood, the gathering of relics from all over, and the building of temples, streets and even taverns, strives to reach a realm that is natural yet elegant, combining the art of the garden with classical Chinese literature, painting and theatre, where in the true essence of traditional culture lies.



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

The classic Chinese garden, having a long standing 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 coming of the new century with a large Chinese style festival, and a new word "*chinoiserie*" was coined, meaning "of Chinese style". All of a sudden, Chinese ceramics, wallpaper, embroidery, garments, furniture and architecture became all the





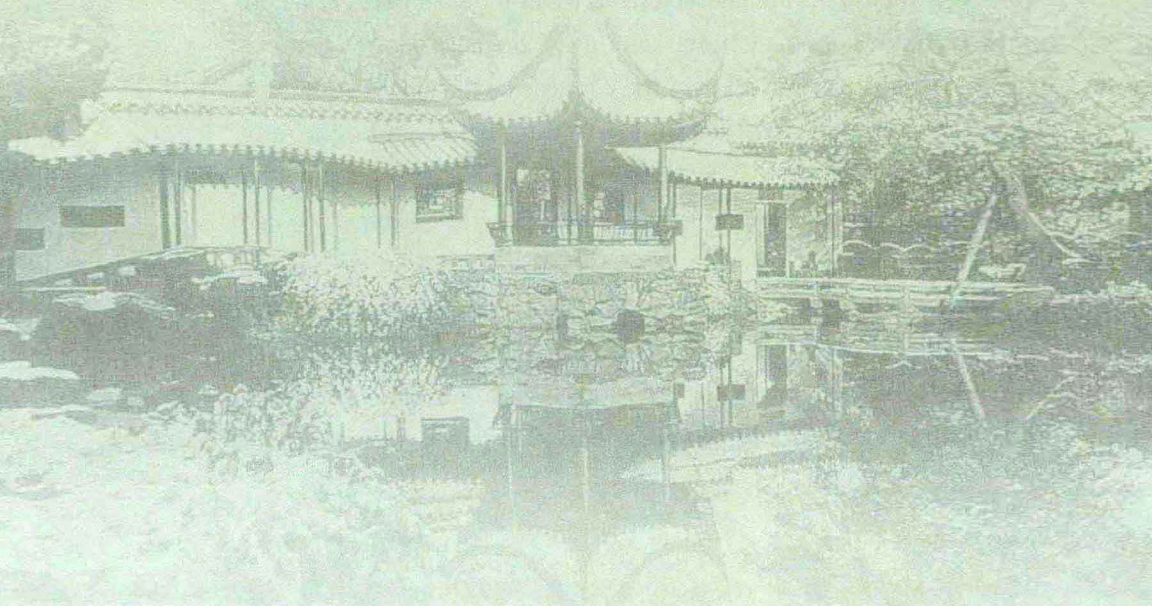
The Summer Palace, already listed in World Cultural Heritage, is the largest and best preserved imperial garden in China, and also one of the most well-known scenic spots of Beijing.

rage in Europe, as represented by France and England. The art of the Chinese garden spread throughout Europe simultaneously, influencing mostly England and France, but other countries as well, such as Germany, Sweden and Russia, bringing about a transition from geometrical gardens to gardens with natural scenery set-ups.

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 building, and what theories have been formed? Let's walk into the Chinese gardens and take a closer look.



Landscape Gardens



The garden should be a perfect blending of nature and construction by man. It should be an imitation of nature, and fully manifest the beauty of nature in limited space; it is also an improvement on nature which should show the painstaking efforts of the garden builder in every corner. The Chinese garden has blended man-made structures like rockery, fish ponds and all manner of pavilions together with flowers, trees, breezes and moonlight of nature, and have combined all these into an artistic entity in which man and nature can co-exist harmoniously.

The presently preserved northern imperial gardens were primarily built in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), and were places where the feudal royalty could live, enjoy walks in, throw banquets, entertain and hunt. They took up large areas of space and were equipped and decorated very lavishly. The building of these gardens required large amounts of human labor and heavy investments. The gardens of South China are concentrated mostly in cities and towns on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, which is where scholars loved to gather since ancient times. This is also where writers and calligraphers would 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, we can also find open-style scenic areas for the pleasure of the visitor, which possess both the mountains and waters of nature, and cultural spots of interest. These scenic areas are similar in nature to parks, such as the famous five mountain ranges—the Taishan Mountains to the east, The Hengshan Mountains to





The Wu Ling Yuan Scenic Area located in Hunan province of China is a mystic, deep, serene, idyllic world.

the south, the Songshan Mountains on the middle plain area of China, the Huashan Mountains to the west, and the Hengshan Mountains (written differently) to the north. After generations of development and management, these have already become renowned scenic park areas. And the West Lake of Hangzhou is an even more exemplifying model for gardens and parks.

Parks with temples are another lovely form of parks and gardens. The so-called “Temple Parks” refer to parks belonging or attached to Buddhist temples, Taoist temples, altar temples or ancestral halls. The large ones are very much like imperial gardens, whereas the smaller ones resemble more the private gardens. These gardens which are interspersed in natural areas can often be found mixed with parks and gardens of a scenic



nature, or are even a part of the scenic parks themselves. Some of the more renowned 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.

Hunting and Communion with the Spirits

The classic Chinese gardens originate from very ancient times. According to records dating way back to the 21st Century BC, there was already the practice of raising and breeding wild animals for the pleasure of the kings and monarchs' loving of hunting, and these enclosures were known as "You". The kings of the Shang Dynasty (circa.16th–11th Century 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. The platforms were built out of earth, and were of incredibly large size. 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 bit exaggerated, but it is a fact that platforms built in the Shang Dynasty were truly very large and high.

Serving as places for hunting and communion with the spirits were the earliest two functions of the Chinese garden. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BC), dukes and princes became very numerous, 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 common people



in ancient times did not symbolize the sacred and unattainable anymore. As the form of the state gradually matured, and social activities such as rites, politics and daily life were increasingly clarified, the platforms in gardens did not strive for size and height anymore, but began to form a close structural connection with the surrounding structures. The fog of primitive religion began to slowly disperse, which revealed the innate beauty of the scenery of nature. People began to move away from the blind worship of supernatural powers, and learned to really enjoy and understand the beauty that nature has bestowed us.

The Symbol of a Unified State

In ancient times it was the traditional belief that the powers of the rulers were bestowed on 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 a consecutive 2,000 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



Portrait of Qinshihuang, the first emperor in China's history



and profound.

From historic annals dating from the Qin and Han periods, we can see many records of large-scale architectural building and construction of gardens during this period which roughly covered 400 years. In the year 221 BC, the Emperor Qinshihuang unified the country and set up a vast feudal empire. He ordered 200 thousand rich families to move to Xianyang in Shaanxi Province, in order to centralize manpower and resources so he could implement his ambitious construction plan. The Qin Dynasty palace is of astoundingly large proportions. The most famous Qin Dynasty palace is the E-fang Palace which was built south of the capital of that time, Xianyang. In the "Annals of History-Section on Emperor Qinshihuang", is written the following passage..."the front palace of E-fang is 500 paces from east to west, and 50 *zhang* (note: one *zhang* equals 10 Chinese feet) from south to north. It is large enough to hold 10 thousand people, and tall enough to erect a 5-*zhang* banner". Emperor Qinshihuang used the Xianyang Palace as the center, and around in a radius extending for scores of miles planned to build over 200 palaces and chambers, which were all to be mutually connected by passageways above the ground. This made this whole region both his palace area and his garden area. This extravagant construction plan was never completed. The Qin Dynasty only lasted 13 years, and the dream of Emperor Qinshihuang of building an empire that would last down the ages went up in flames together with the fire that razed E-fang Palace. It is said that the fire raged for 3 months before E-fang Palace was finally burnt 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 Western Han were also very large in scope. Of palaces in Chang'an city, the Changle Palace and





Quiet and simple rural scenery portrayed in the famous East Jin painting *The Ode of Luo Deity*.

Weiyang Palace alone took up one third of the whole area of the city. If you add some of the smaller palaces such as Gui Palace, Bei (North) Palace and Mingguang Palace, the palace area took up over one half of the whole city, whose area proper was 36 square kilometers. This is over 20 times the space occupied by the Forbidden City of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which took up approximately 0.72 square kilometer.

The power of the Han Dynasty and its garden construction both reached their peak during the reign of the Emperor Han Wu (140–87 BC). In order to show the absolute authority of the emperor, Emperor Han Wu personally oversaw the construction of gardens. The Shanglin Yuan (Upper Woods Garden) is situated south of Chang'an, starting north from the southern banks of the Wei River and terminating at the foot of the Zhongnan Mountains. It is surrounded by a wall of approximately 130-



CHINESE GARDENS

160 kilometers, which includes the northern slopes of Zhongnan Mountains and the southern slopes of Jiujun Mountains. The eight largest rivers of central Shaanxi all run from north to south through the garden. Just the Kunming Pond alone, which was dug with manual labor, has an area of 150 hectares, which is quite sufficient for navy training activities. Inside the garden are 12 clusters of buildings, and the garden is also complete with paths, covered corridors, bridges and pavilions, which completed the sense of changes in space. There were separate palaces and gardens for the cultivation of flowers and plants, enjoyment of music, dog racing and the planting of weeping willows, all for



The Goose Playing Pond in the Orchid Pavilion in Shaoxing, an ancient garden where East Jin calligrapher Wang Xizhi watched geese and created calligraphic work.

