



## East-West relational imaginaries: Classical Chinese gardens & self cultivation

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## East-West relational imaginaries: Classical Chinese gardens & self cultivation

Gardens, like Art, are cultural enterprises associated with improving the endowments of human character and the environment. Metaphorical references to cultivating the untamed landscapes of Nature and the Self abound in literature and philosophy from ancient times to the present emerging as a global, if dynamically nuanced, phenomenon. The Roman orator Cicero was among the first western thinkers to use the term *cultura* – the Latin root for both ‘culture’ and ‘cultivation’ – to characterize the refinement of the *animi* or soul (Nordalm, n.d.). Analogies between gardening and the human spirit proliferated further with the spread of Christianity. A 1625 essay ‘Of Gardens’, noted,

God *Almightie* first Planted a *Garden*. And indeed, it is the Purest of Human pleasure. It is the Greatest Refreshment to the Spirits of Man; Without which, *Buildings* and *Pallaces* are but Grosse Handy-works. And a Man shall euer see, that when Ages grow to Civility and Elegancie, Men come to *Build Stately*, sooner than to *Garden Finely*: As if *Gardening* were the Greater Perfection (Bacon, 2012).

The author, Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626), was Lord Chancellor of England and a philosopher of immense influence. Bacon studied stately gardens throughout England and sketched plans for ideal garden designs. In addition to laying the cultural foundations shaping people’s sensibilities toward natural environments in the eighteenth century, Bacon’s natural philosophy spoke directly, and figuratively, to the enterprise of colonization from its inception. He wrote philosophical essays exploring the desirable impact of gardening on society overall with a specific interest in the New World as an archetypal Garden of Eden. The Augustinian notion of original sin being passed down from Adam meant mankind no longer had command of knowledge about the natural world. Colonials were encouraged to create a Country of Plantation by transplanting people, and planting actual gardens, while keeping loftier ideals, and God, in mind. The goal was to recover from, and make restitution for, mankind’s loss of power and sovereignty ‘in his first state of creation’ in the Garden of Eden as ordained by God while rising above the more debased concerns of governments which sought to extract profits and assert military dominance. Sorana Corneanu’s investigation into the history of ideas positions Francis Bacon within the early modern context of the Royal Society virtuosi arguing that their experimental programs of inquiry regarding disciplined judgment, the study of nature, and the study of scripture fulfill the role of regimens for curing, ordering, and educating the mind toward an ethical purpose. Corneanu tracks this concept back to the ancient tradition of *cultura animi* (Corneanu, 2012). In other words, gardening was a measure of perfection and civility for those who embraced the ideals of natural philosophy. Bacon’s grand scheme for reclamation was to develop a compendium of all worldly knowledge garnered through scientific learning. In their research on botanical decolonization, Tomaž Mastnak and anthropologists Julia Elyachar and Tom Boellstorff explore the philosophical underpinnings of colonial settler ambition and define Bacon’s philosophy as seeking to plant a Paradise in historical time which would enlarge ‘the bounds of Human Empire’ over nature (Mastnak et al., 2014). This intriguing insight considers both sacred and secular dimensions of landscape gardens as rhetorical visualizations and reified practice. Conceptualizing New World plantations in Edenic terms embodied Christian ethics and

offered guidance for following a righteous pathway for moral self-cultivation. Concurrently, expressing identity through gardening as a horticultural artform became a measure of individual perfection and civility for those who embraced the ideals of natural philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment. Bringing order and understanding to bear upon this new landscape required a system for visualizing the breadth of human knowledge as it existed up to that historical moment. Bacon chose the Porphyrian tree to map the relationships of all branches of human learning—a form figuratively linked to the biblical Tree of Knowledge—with natural philosophy as its trunk.

Eastern writers and philosophers similarly extolled the virtues of Classical Chinese Garden traditions evoking what might be best described as a *presence of place* to promote reflection upon the harmonious alignment between humans and nature (Casey, 2002). One distinction between self-cultivation in Eastern and Western contexts is that Chinese thought places greater emphasis on the moral dimension of the self and, as Michael Slote notes, 'offers no clear view of why people should want to become more virtuous and how they can do so largely through their own efforts' (Slote, 2019). Maggie Keswick's seminal publication in English on the origins of the Chinese garden characterizes the approach as one of *building* rather than the *planting* approach conceptualized in the Baconian model (Keswick, 2003). In essence, a classical Chinese garden is constructed as a spatial imaginary of the real; a staged setting for human enactments of exploration and enlightenment using Nature as the catalyst. Elemental connections between humans and the earth, air, and water of garden spaces equate to temporal rhythms of seasons and cyclical aspects of decay and regeneration. Comprehending the emblematic aspects of landscape gardens often leads scholars to reflect upon metaphorical associations between the design of garden elements and concepts in the external world to illuminate macro and micro corollaries. For example, Donia Zhang links the natural and architectural elements of classical Chinese gardens to contemporary concerns about environmental ethics, aesthetic appreciation, and moral education in ways that associate the design philosophy of landscape with self-cultivation (Zhang, 2018). Michael Peters considers gardening metaphors within the broader cultural ethos of educational philosophies deploying concepts of self-cultivation tied to Chinese humanism. In this context, transformational aspects of self-cultivation occur incrementally using what Peters terms 'rituals and socio-psychological processes that are claimed to enhance our moral capacities' (Peters, 2021).

Classical Chinese gardens function as emblematic spaces and catalysts for positive transformation among those positioned to engage on a metaphysical level with the structured environment. The ideation of gardens as a site of self-cultivation – for purposes of moral education for instance – is deeply rooted in privilege. While socio-political class structures factor into the study of garden culture in both the East and the West, it should be noted that the boundaries of class are drawn differently forming distinctive social hierarchies. Western categories like 'landed gentry' have no direct correlation in Chinese history which, in the Confucian class system instituted under imperial rule, positions scholar-elites above farmers, artisans, and merchants. Decoding the aesthetics of form and iconography of design entails consideration of how social privilege relates to the formation of emblematic systems of knowledge and understanding. Traditionally, the value of classical Chinese gardens as a tool for self-cultivation was reserved for patrons and a select circle of individuals like scholars whose purview was moral education. The intellectual 'work' of improvement that happened in this space was sensorial, temporal, and metacognitive while the physical 'labor' involved in creating and maintaining the artifice of the ephemeral garden remained obscured. Erasure of the visible labor necessary to construct and maintain these rural retreats encouraged existential engagements with the aesthetics of form. Escape from the outside world for purposes of banqueting, meditation, pleasurable and artistic pursuits, or actions expressing the owner's cultivation and taste of the owner animated these sites of recreated Nature. Scholar gardens tended to be more intimate allowing poetic and artistic beauty to be appreciated in relative isolation. Gardens built for the pleasure of imperial

patrons assumed a more imposing scale designed to impress. Both forms allowed for a range of functions associated with a wholistic approach to self-education that fostered transformative aspirations. More focus was placed on the inner journey than arriving at a destination of achievement, whereas in western thought, markers of attainment were more pronounced and visible.

Today the garden city of Suzhou in Jiangsu province is defined by its iconic classical Chinese garden designs from the mid-Ming to early-Qing dynasties which include numerous private residential, as well as royal, gardens. The UNESCO World Heritage site lists these as masterpieces of garden art spanning over two thousand years of Chinese landscape garden design (UNESCO/NHK, n.d.). The private gardens emerged in the fourth century inspired by Wu Kingdom royal hunting gardens. Artfully idealized simulations of nature continued to evolve reaching an apex in the eighteenth century. Although Eastern and Western gardens were profoundly influenced by broadly defined aesthetic concepts of fine art as a means of refining and improving human nature, divergences are detectable in East and West historical conventions relative to perceptions of gardening as an artform. Garden art and visual art share several commonalities relating to the philosophy of aesthetics, symbolism and other processes of meaning making, as well as theories and methodologies for research, analysis, and interpretation. However, Eurocentric traditions considered representations of the human figure as the protagonist in historical subjects to be the epitome of achievement in fine art painting, while the genre of landscape painting was more highly regarded in Chinese art traditions. This hierarchy of genres, reified in western educational and academic institutions, meant landscape gardens were not widely acknowledged as belonging within the pantheon of fine arts until the eighteenth century. Thomas Jefferson was among those who declared ornamental gardens to be worthy of this status, arguing in favor of gardening being added to painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, and oratory as the seventh fine art. A distinction was drawn between the mechanical arts associated with horticulture and gardening as 'embellishing grounds by fancy' which required understanding and imagination or genius (National Archives, 1805). Jefferson reasoned that 'Ld. Kaims has justly proved this [gardening] to be entitled to the appellation of a fine art. it is nearly allied to landscape painting, & accordingly we generally find the landscape painter the best designer of a garden' (National Archives, 1805). The historical roots of gardening as an artform intertwined with the artistic ideas of landscape painting can be traced back to ancient times in China. Landscape gardens and landscape paintings were unified by a shared goal of cultivating an aesthetic experience. Wai-Yee Li notes that 'gardens have very real social and sometimes economic functions' but share intrinsic links with various artforms and genres including subjectivity as a defining aspect (Li, 2012).

The fundamental elements of classical Chinese gardens are walls, ponds, rocks, and architectural features connected by winding paths. Multiple visual tropes are carefully composed to create views and focal points and movement through the space is orchestrated. The observer experiences diverse and artfully contrived relationships within the composition as one would when interacting with a landscape painting. The Garden of Cultivation in Suzhou is among the nine best preserved Ming Dynasty examples that seek to recreate natural landscapes as a complex array of meticulously curated miniature worlds. Each configuration employs rocks, water, and plants to focus upon the overall theme of Mountain and Water resulting in an exquisite whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The compositions of these worlds-in-miniature reflect the expressive forms and freehand brushwork of landscape paintings and, like scroll imagery, reveal themselves sequentially. In this regard, understanding the metaphysical experiences associated with garden environments held the possibility of harmonizing with nature while cultivating one's temperament. Mobility is an innate aspect of the viewing experience requiring the observer to move through, and across, the landscapes on display. Deep meditation and transformative experience—essential elements for self-cultivation—cannot be fully achieved without the temporality associated with mobility in the form of the human body

moving through a geographic space or the gaze of the eye taking the mind on a journey through pictorial space.

Many scholars have realized the importance of view in traditional Chinese garden design; however, in Zhiming Li's estimation, 'subject to limitations of research methods, the visual structure of traditional garden space has not been fully understood yet'. Zhiming Li describes the experience of walking through the Linger Garden in Suzhou as a shocking confrontation with a 'seemingly random and complex arrangement of living quarters, reception halls, pavilions, corridors, terrace houses, hills, creeks, and vegetation' (Li, 2011). Utilizing a mathematically based space syntax technique known as isovist analysis, Li determines that the eye-level center of visual integration in the Linger Garden is the central mountain and the main pool area. An isovist field assumes an environment is defined as a collection of visible real surfaces in space with a set of all points visible from a given vantage point (Benedikt 1979). This is a fruitful research method for conducting behavioral and perceptual studies in architecture. A numerical analysis of constructed spaces and framed vantage points in a classical Chinese garden may seem far afield from philosophical concerns of self-cultivation practices, but what better way to verify, or perhaps even reorient, our thinking about human interactions with nature in purposefully contrived garden environments? What might be learned from mapping these garden sites as overlays on what is already known about self-cultivation? *Shan Shui*, which translates as 'mountains and water', is the Chinese word for landscape, thus the focal points of the central mountain and main pool identified through an isovist analysis of the Linger Garden is not surprising. Indeed, it helps to decipher the meanings in garden spaces and to better understand how visual perception is guided by invisible design rules. For Daoists, the mountain is the masculine *yang* and water the is *yin*, but that relational balance is reversed in Confucianism. What might a new way of 'looking' and reflecting on what is 'seen' in an isovist field of vision reveal about the interplay of Daoist and Confucianist thought in classical Chinese gardens? Zhang points out that Daoism and Confucianism co-exist with the geometric hierarchy of the courtyard house mirroring the desire to be in 'harmony with humans' while organic spontaneity evoked the Daoist principle of 'harmony with nature' (Zhang, 2018). Illuminating new patterns of thought further enhances the depth of understanding about the purpose and balance embodied in self-cultivation practices that took place in traditional Chinese gardens.

Global concerns are shifting the educational landscape in the twenty-first century with the potential to reveal fresh confluences between humans and nature. While rhetorical, pictorial, and philosophical differences between East and West conceptualizations of self-cultivation are evident, there is an increasing interest in focusing upon less binary approaches in deference to postmodern and postcolonial concerns. Keswick is often quoted as saying 'Chinese history is littered with the corpse of gardens' yet increasing numbers are being unearthed (Li, 2017). There is a renewed will in the 21st century to discover classical Chinese gardens through archeological digs, preservation projects, restorative conservation projects, as well as reproductions and replications transplanted into diverse cultural contexts. In 1980 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York created an indoor replica in its Astor Court of the Suzhou Scholar's Garden from the Garden of the Fishnet Master (Li, 2017). In 1986, The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden opened in Vancouver, British Columbia as the first full scale scholars garden built outside of China, or in fact anywhere, since the Ming Dynasty. The international effort was supported by the governments of China and Canada, and involved collaboration from a diverse team of architects, designers and artisans. Other examples soon followed including the Lan Su Garden (Garden of Awakening Orchids) in Portland, Oregon (2000) as a Sister Cities project promoting knowledge of cultural heritage, and Liu Fang Yuan (Garden of Flowing Fragrance) at California's Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens (2008) (Li, 2017). The National Arboretum in Washington D.C. was the site of a groundbreaking ceremony in the fall of 2016

for the most ambitious project to date, a twelve-acre decade-long undertaking with a \$100 million dollar budget as a symbol of Sino-US relations (Li, 2017). The underlying design philosophy was to incorporate salient features from residential classical Chinese gardens in Yangzhou and Suzhou to showcase the Confucian and Daoist principle of the Unity of Heaven and Human and the need to live in harmony with nature (National China Garden Foundation, 2015). Educational opportunities arise from this evolving history and legacy of classical Chinese gardens, and it is a sign of the times that replications are studied alongside originals in the curriculum of the American academy (Han, 2012).

Gardens are organic and ephemeral by nature. Any 'recreations' or historical 'recoveries' are abstractions and re-presentations of the original regardless of the intent to be authentic. The behaviors of self-cultivation for which many classical Chinese gardens were constructed are even less haptic as Wai-Yee Li has argued in the study of 'Gardens and Illusions from Late Ming to Early Qing'. The folds of history are where an interdisciplinary study of concepts may be theorized to enhance and broaden our understanding of classical Chinese gardens, including those on the ground in their original cultural context and those transplanted to other geographic locales. Mobility of objects and ideas is increasingly taking priority over national frameworks and stylistic chronologies to reorient and disassemble existing hierarchies in arts and humanities narratives. The urge to understand the nature of Confucian self-cultivation as it relates to classical Chinese gardens will not be extinguished. However, the scope may expand as we seek ways of understanding how the past inflects upon the present, and how cultivating awareness of diverse subjectivities generates culturally sensitive global citizens cognizant of the value and efficacy of the natural environment and the importance of human stewardship.

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