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Nature and Ideology

Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century

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Nature and Ideology in Western Descriptions of the Chinese Garden

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To the first European who recorded his opinions of an actual garden in China, "nature" was never a part of the proposition at all. What impressed the Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci about the great garden of Xu Hongji, Duke of Weiguo, which he visited in Nanjing in 1599, was the mannerist virtuosity of its complex design, with its "halls, chambers, loggias, towers, courtyards, and other magnificent edifices" dominated by "an artificially constructed mountain of rock, full of many caves, loggias, steps, small rooms, arbors, fishponds, and other gallantries."[1] The metaphor which came to Ricci's pen was that of the labyrinth, where "to visit all the parts required two or three hours of time, before making one's way out by another door." Steeped as he was in the writings of Pliny and Cicero, Ricci was well aware of the terms of European debate about the relationship between garden culture and "nature," even if he did not seek to read them into his experience of visiting a specific site in China.[2] However, he cannot have known that in the fifty years preceding his arrival a reordering of priorities had taken place in China structured around a different polarity, one opposing the gardened landscape as mimesis of productive, more specifically fruitful, horticulture, to the garden as visually composed scene, faithful to formal canons of painting composition. This polarity within Chinese discourses of the garden, which never entirely disappears through the late imperial period, is explicitly not the subject of this paper.[3] Nor am I interested here in the putative "influence" of gardens in China on garden-making practice outside that country. The objects of study with which this paper engages are not gardens in China at all, but statements about those gardens made by Europeans and Americans, statements which are themselves part of the great archive of Orientalism, in which the term *nature* is deployed in an essentializing way with regard to an undifferentiated "Chinese garden." This is always done with more or less specific allusion to the "nature" (in the sense of essential, invariant characteristics) of China itself. Discussions of "the Chinese garden" are, therefore, I will argue, of

[1] P. M. D'Elia, S.J., ed., *Fonti Ricciane . . .*, vol. 2, Rome, 1942, 64.

[2] C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century,* Berkeley, 1990, 116–49.

[3] This forms the main theme of a book by the present author, entitled *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China*, London, 1996. See also C. Clunas, "The Gift and the Garden," *Orientations* 26, 2 (1995), 38–45.

some importance in mapping the larger set of practices of European and American ideological engagement with the Chinese polity in the high age of imperialism and beyond. It will be necessary to look at statements from a period much earlier than that covered by the majority of contributions to this volume, but which remain as an unexamined stratum in later writers. I will attempt to show how attitudes on the part of Western writers to the place of "nature" in "the Chinese garden" underwent a complete reversal in the hundred years from about 1850 to about 1950, and how this reversal owes less to any supposedly increased understanding of constructions of the idea of the garden in China, than it does to changes in the construing of the idea of "nature," purely within European and American discourse.

The Jesuit presence around the imperial court remained the chief conduit of accounts of garden culture in China through the eighteenth century in Europe and America. The most widely disseminated and influential text in this regard is undoubtedly that given by Jean-Denis Attiret, familiar to a British audience of the day through its translation and publication as a separate short work in 1752. In *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens near Pekin*, the publisher retains the framing device of a personal letter from Attiret, addressed to a Parisian correspondent, which contains this passage: "I thank you in particular for the Box full of Works in Straw, and Flowers, which came very safe to me: but I beg of you not to put yourself to any such Expence for the future; for the Chinese very much exceed the Europeans, in those kinds of works; and particularly in their Artificial Flowers." A footnote reinforces the fraudulent verisimilitude of these marvels "so exactly like real flowers, that one is apt to forget one's self, and smell them."[4]

This piece of *politesse* from Attiret's prefatory remarks has been seldom remarked on by scholars, but it derives an interesting significance when juxtaposed with one of the most frequently quoted passages from this often-cited text. After stressing the absolute difference between the emperor's gardens and anything existing in Europe, particularly as regards the contrast between "formal strait Walks" and "various Turnings and Windings," the author goes on:

> All the Risings and Hills are sprinkled with Trees; and particularly with Flowering-trees, which are here very common. The Sides of the Canals, or lesser Streams, are not faced, (as they are with us,) with smooth Stone, and in a strait Line; but look rude and rustic, with different Pieces of Rock, some of which jut out, and others recede inwards; and are placed with so much Art, that you would take it to be the Work of Nature. . . . The Banks are sprinkled with Flowers, which rise up even thro' the Hollows in the Rock-work, as if they had been produced there naturally.[5]

For Attiret, then, the Chinese garden is a site where an excess of artificiality is used to create an *illusion* of nature, as in the flowers so real-seeming you might attempt to smell them, and in the rocks placed with *so much Art* that they appear to be natural. The topos employed here is one seen elsewhere in descriptions of Chinese crafts in the eighteenth century, one of an excessively

[4] J. D. Attiret, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens near Pekin*, trans. J. Spence, New York and London, 1982, 2.

[5] Ibid., 9–10.

intricate, imbricated craftsmanship which generates an illusion of something real but which constantly teeters on the edge of collapse into meretriciousness. The Orientalist fable most neatly encapsulating this is Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the Emperor of China's nightingale, which draws on the belief, widespread by the time he wrote, in Chinese willingness to exalt the complex and artificial over the simple and natural. The Chinese were not in this view "primitive," but *too* highly sophisticated. Another topos (explored by other papers in this volume) is the equation of nature and irregularity. The post-Darwinian idea, implied if not actually explicitly stated in the writings of Willy Lange and William Robinson,[6] of the natural garden as one in which the plants are indigenous to the region is nowhere seen in Attiret or in any other *ancien régime* commentators on horticulture in China. Indeed, plants are of very little concern to Attiret's discussion of gardens at all (though there was a contemporaneous learned discourse of the botany of China, this was unrelated to writing on garden *design*[7]). From Sir William Temple in the late seventeenth century, through William Chambers and beyond into the early nineteenth century, it is an artificially induced irregularity which is the mark of the "natural" Chinese garden. It appears, for example, in the writing of the Danish geographer Conrad Malte-Brun (1775–1826), who thought the imitation of nature *too* slavish, in that the irregularity merely matched that of the unmodified landscape of China itself:

> If they [the Chinese] have discovered a sort of beauty in the arrangement of their gardens and the distribution of their grounds, it is because they have copied with exactness nature in a strange though picturesque form. Projecting rocks, as if threatening every moment to fall, bridges hung over abyss, stunted fir scattered on the sides of steep mountains, extensive lakes, rapid torrents, foaming cascades, and pagodas rising their pyramidal forms in the midst of this confusion; such are the Chinese landscapes on a large, and their gardens on a small scale.[8]

The more powerful equation between a natural unevenness in the disposition of the land and a natural inequality in the dispensation of ownership of that land will, as we shall see, surface very explicitly in the nineteenth century in the context of horticulture in China.

More than eighty years separate Attiret from the second edition of J. C. Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* in 1824, years which saw major changes in the political and ideological climate in which such a work could be interpreted.[9] Not the least important was the settlement of the struggle between France and Britain for political hegemony in Asia, decisively in favor of the latter. British commercial interests now increasingly demanded the "opening" of China, on terms of trade acceptable to them, and the raised ideological heat can be immediately felt even in

[6] G. Gröning and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn, "Some Notes on the Mania for Native Plants in Germany," *Landscape Journal* 11, 2 (1992), 116–26.

[7] For a recent discussion, see M.-P. Dumoulin-Genest, "Note sur les plantes chinoises dans les jardins françaises du XVIII siècle: De l'experimentation à la diffusion," *Etudes chinoises* 11, 2 (1992), 141–57.

[8] C. Malte-Brun, *A System of Universal Geography,* vol. 1, Boston, 1843, 413, cited in Yi-fu Tuan, *Topophilia,* New York, 1974, 128.

[9] M. L. Simo, *Loudon and the Landscape: From Country Seat to Metropolis, 1783–1843,* Yale Publications in the History of Art 38, New Haven and London, 1988, 147–48.

a work ostensibly devoted to a subject as remote from immediate political concerns as gardening. Loudon begins by stating:

> We know little of the gardening of China, notwithstanding all that has been written and asserted on the subject. It does not appear perfectly clear to us, that the difference between the gardens of Persia and India, and those of China, is so great as has been very generally asserted and believed. It is evident, that the Chinese *study irregularity and imitate nature* [my italics], in attempting to form rocks; but whether this imitation is carried to that extent in wood, water and ground, and conducted on principles so refined as those given the Chinese by Sir William Chambers, appears very doubtful.[10]

Having shed doubt on the ability of the Chinese even to imitate nature in any meaningful sense other than the creation of rock work, and after a passage of generally dismissive comment on the enthusiasm for the Chinese style of garden seen in writers of the previous century like Le Comte, Osbeck, Attiret, and Chambers, Loudon goes fully on to the offensive. He quotes Lord Macartney, whose authority as leader of the British embassy to the Chinese emperor in 1793 was very great. Macartney had *been there*, he *knew*.[11] And what he knew brings out for the first time the dominating theme of British writing throughout the following century. The Chinese are not merely unsympathetic to nature, they are at war with it: "It is our excellence to improve nature; that of a Chinese gardener to conquer her: his aim is to change everything from what he found it. A waste he adorns with trees; a desert he waters with a river or lake; and on a smooth flat are raised hills, hollowed out valleys, and placed all sorts of buildings." Loudon himself presses home this theme of the essential perversity of the Chinese garden on the very next page: "The British works, published after different embassies, contain accounts of their modes of propagation, by inarching and local radication; of their dwarfing forest-trees, producing double-flowers, monstrous unions, and various other exertions, in the way of conquering nature."[12] Rather inconsistently, Loudon goes on to attack Chinese horticulture for knowing nothing of grafting, which is seen by him as a completely unproblematic and "natural" activity. The point is not so much that he is completely factually wrong (grafting had been practiced for centuries), as that he is selective about exactly which interventions count as "natural." No text could spell out more clearly the extent to which "nature" is entirely a product of ideology, a discursive object which as strongly as any (even "mankind") acts to efface the traces of its production.

It is necessary for Loudon's general argument that a perverse and monstrous artificiality, and *not* fidelity to nature's irregularities, be the essential characteristic of the Chinese garden, since the latter underpins his discussion of "Gardening Considered as to its Progress and Present State under Different Political and Geographical Circumstances." He begins by dividing government

[10] J. C. Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening; comprising the Theory and Practice of Horticulture, Floriculture, Arboriculture and Landscape Gardening, Including all the Latest Improvements; a General History of Gardening in all Countries; and a Statistical View of its Present State, with Suggestions for its Future Progress in the British Isles*, 2nd ed., London, 1824, 101.

[11] J. L. Hevia, "The Macartney Mission in the History of Sino-Western Relations," in R. Bickers, ed., *Ritual and Diplomacy: The Macartney Mission to China, 1792–1794*, Papers Presented to the 1992 Conference of the British Association for Chinese Studies Marking the Bicentenary of the Macartney Mission to China, London, 1993, 57–80.

[12] Loudon, *Encyclopaedia*, 1824 ed., 103–4.

into two classes, along terms standard to early nineteenth-century liberal political economy. Primitive governments are despotisms, "calculated for rude and ignorant ages, when man, in a state of infancy, is governed by a king, as children are ruled by their parents." Rational governments are those in which the people are "governed by laws formed by a congregated assemblage of their own body." Rationality and nature are now as one. He goes on to make the link: "Gardening in all its branches will be most advantageously displayed where the people are free. The final tendency of every free government or society is to conglomerate property in irregular masses, as *nature has distributed all her properties* [my italics]; and this irregularity is the most favourable for gardening both as a necessary, convenient, and elegant art."[13] China, for British thinkers of Loudon's day the textbook infantilizing despotism, was believed (again incorrectly) to have no secure conception of private property. This was a given in Western constructions of China from Montesquieu through Adam Ferguson to Marx. Ergo it remained "in a state of infancy," where no necessary, convenient, or elegant art could flourish, least of all one which depended on the enlightened and improving owner of landed property, as exemplified for example by the patrons of contemporary landscape architects like Humphry Repton.

Loudon's revised edition of 1834, compiled almost on the eve of the conflict by which British armies were to attempt to bombard China out of its supposed infancy, greatly enlarges the section on gardening history in general, including that on China. The effect is to intensify the denigration of the Chinese garden, again through the supposedly irrefutable testimony of eyewitnesses. The principal of these is a Mr. Main, whose account of the garden of one of the great Cantonese merchants in 1793/4 characterizes it in terms such as, "insignificant intricacy . . . ridiculously fantastic . . . intentionally uneven." The garden is defined as a series of absences, "no scope of ornamental disposition; no rational design; the whole being an incongruous combination of unnatural association."[14] The irrational must, in these terms, be against nature. Loudon then proceeds to ram home the linkage between the irrational garden and the irrational Chinese who produced it, in a classic Orientalist passage; "Chinese taste in gardening, it thus appears, partakes of the general character of the people, and is characterised by their leading feature, peculiarity. The love of the grotesque and of monstrosities is seldom accompanied in individuals of any country with enlightened views and liberal sentiments, which are almost always found combined with simplicity."[15] For a thing to be natural it must not only be rational, it must also be simple.

For many nineteenth-century writers, the key exhibit in the unnatural, irrational, and overcomplicated Chinese garden was the dwarfed trees usually known in English by their Japanese name of "bonsai" (Chinese: *pan zai*, "pot planting"; or *pan jing*, "pot landscape"). Although known of since the eighteenth century, these become more of a focus of interest in the nineteenth. They are discussed extensively in an article entitled "Chinese Method of Dwarfing Trees," published by an author signing only with the initials "W.I.," in the *Gardener's Chronicle* of 21

[13] Ibid., 110–11.

[14] J. C. Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening . . . A New Edition, Considerably Improved and Enlarged*, London, 1834, 386.

[15] Ibid., 388.

November 1846. Alluding to "the late Chinese war," the author states that his account is based on one given by a member of the French commercial expedition sent out to conclude a trade agreement of the kind which the war was designed to make possible.[16] After a typical Francophobe jibe at the expedition's relative lack of success, he goes on to describe the scene in the city of Canton on a festival day, where miniature trees formed part of the street decoration. These are characterized immediately as "twisted and distorted . . . these little trees, so contemptible in appearance . . . pitiful to look at, unhealthy, distorted, and covered with excoriations without number." The conclusion is drawn:

> That for the Chinese nothing is beautiful but that which is hideous; that a stunted shrub without leaves is a wonder that is worth all the forests of the universe; and so the principal occupation of the Chinese nurseryman is to combat Nature in everything that is beautiful or rich. . . . It is not only in this case to get ready a branch, but it is a struggle they undertake with Nature, which consists in making hideous that which Nature has created beautiful, to lame and deform that which she has made straight and well looking, to render mean and unhealthy that which she has created vigorous and robust.[17]

The entire account is structured around a metaphor of torture, as the stages of progressively forcing and stunting the tree are constructed in terms of a fiendishly cruel Chinese gardener who alternately torments and revives the unfortunate plant. The natural cruelty of the Chinese is thus revealed in their attitude to nature. Here "nature" means plants.

An interest in the design, as opposed to the plant matter, of Chinese gardens does not reappear in any European source until the 1880s, when it is the subject of an extended passage in *L'Art des jardins . . .*, by Ernouf and Alphand, one of the pioneering texts of a universalist "history of gardens." Noting the precedence of "les peuples jaunes" in the creation of "les parcs irréguliers," the authors comment: "Very competent authors see in these gardens a derivation from and a sort of *vegetal* continuation of the convoluted and capricious architecture of the Chinese. We would also willingly see in them a traditional reminiscence of the mountain regions inhabited by the ancestors of these peoples."[18]

An elaborate (and entirely fanciful) theory about racial memory is then developed, whereby the rock work of the Chinese garden is intended to evoke the mountains of central Asia from which the Chinese race is conceived to have sprung. Despite the work's claims to contain a history of gardens, the coverage is extremely patchy, jumping from the semi-mythical debauches

[16] This is the expedition, the collected souvenirs of which were catalogued by J. C. P. I. Hedde (1801–80) in his *Descriptions méthodiques des produits divers recueillis dans un voyage en Chine*, St. Etienne, 1848. On p. 81 is a telling description of the "Western Garden" in the city of Suzhou, which reads like a stage direction for *Turandot* or some other Orientalist fantasy: "Grottes. Iles de pierre flottantes. Montagnes artificielles. Arbres nains figurant des pagodes et des animaux. Rochers de marbre et fontaines à dessins fantastiques. Fleurs singulières. Maisons de plaisir et de délassement."

[17] W.I., "Chinese Method of Dwarfing Trees," *Gardener's Chronicle*, 21 November 1846, unpaginated. The continued capitalization of "Nature," in a manner which was becoming reserved in English orthography at this period for the name of the Deity, is noteworthy.

[18] Le Baron Ernouf and A. Alphand, *L'Art des jardins . . .*, Paris, 1882, 17–18. The closely contemporary *Der Garten, Seine Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, by Jakob von Falke, Berlin and Stuttgart, 1884, does not mention East Asia at all.

(which happen to take place in a hunting park) of the bad last emperor of the Shang dynasty around 1000 B.C., to the accounts of the Jesuits Gerbillon and Attiret. The latter is quoted extensively, and blamed for overenthusiasm, particularly in unreasonably praising the imperial gardens for their naturalness. Invoking the topos of foot binding, the great Orientalist fetishistic intersection of deviant sexuality and torture, Ernouf and Alphand declare: "The Chinese deal with rocks, trees, streams etc. as they do with the feet of their women." Here it is not just individual plants which suffer the fiendish attentions of Chinese gardeners. They conclude, "These landscape chinoiseries are to *la grande nature* what acrostics are to poetry."[19] The foot binding metaphor incidentally surfaces in an oblique form in one of the classic texts of garden design at precisely this period, in *The English Flower Garden* of 1883, by William Robinson (1838–1935), when he rails against the clipped yew hedges of Victorian Britain with the words, "What right have we to deform things so lovely in form! No cramming of Chinese feet into impossible shoes is half so foolish as the wilful and brutal distortion of the beautiful forms of trees."[20] We are, I think, entitled to infer from this that Robinson's approach to the Chinese garden might well have shared the essentially denigratory position of his contemporaries.

A new theme is, however, introduced by the French authors in the contrast between Chinese and Japanese gardens, to the explicit disadvantage of the former. As is standard in the period of "Japonisme" (and *L'Art des jardins* falls right in the middle of it), this contrast, which is applied widely across all sorts of art forms, pits a decayed, exhausted, overfamiliar "China" against a still vital, "undiscovered" Japan.[21] Here it takes the form of the statement, "Although subject to the same aberrations of taste as the Chinese, the Japanese seem blessed with the highest artistic aptitudes. They proved it well at the French exhibition of 1878." The increasing quantity of admiring literature about the Japanese garden runs as a constant counterpoint to any discussion about China from this point on.

By the end of the nineteenth century, when the British felt generally more comfortable about their hegemony in Asia than they had done in the age of J. C. Loudon, general accounts of the Chinese garden lose some of the condemnatory shrillness which they have in that author. However, the sense of the Chinese garden as being in some sense a contest with the natural persists. In the *Gardener's Chronicle* of 25 January 1890, notice is taken of the account of a garden in a book called *Wanderings of a Globe Trotter*, by Lewis Wingfield: "The garden is cut up into various levels by a *tortuous and labyrinthine* [my italics] rockery, made of clinkers and pieces of rough stone, varied by pools and canals, or, rather, puddles and gutters of dirty opaque water. . . . The landscape gardener seems to have set himself the task of seeing how many ups and downs he could introduce, how many funny little bridges, and passages leading nowhere."[22] Six years later the same journal writes: "There are fashions in gardening in Asia, as well as in the western countries of the Old World, and those of China and Japan strike us westerns by their grotesque-

[19] Ernouf and Alphand, *L'art des jardins,* 21.

[20] W. Robinson, *The English Flower Garden,* 15th ed., London, 1933, reprinted New York, 1984, 216–17.

[21] A. Jackson, "Imagining Japan: The Victorian Perception and Acquisition of Japanese Culture," *Journal of Design History* 5, 4 (1992), 245–56.

[22] "Chinese Gardens," *Gardener's Chronicle,* 25 January 1890.

ness, formality, and the extreme of artificiality employed in the production of the desired effects. . . . But for perverted ingenuity of a high order, we must turn to the specimens of contorted conifers."

There is, however, a glimmer of cultural relativism here, in the acceptance of different "fashions" in different countries, and there is more of admiration than condemnation (certainly no allusion to "torture") in the account of the techniques of dwarfing. Instead we read of the "patient, careful tending of the eastern gardener," and the reader is reminded of the positive effect bonsai conifers made when exhibited at the previous Temple Horticultural Show by the famous London nurseryman Veitch.[23]

These were the decades in which William Robinson's idea of the more "natural" garden were being propagated and were beginning to gain acceptance.[24] However, they were also the years of the most intensive Western botanical exploration of China, which were to result in major transfers of plant matter from Asia to Europe and America. As the standard work on the history of the Royal Horticultural Society points out: "The other circumstance which came to Robinson's aid—as well as to Miss Jekyll's—was the opening up of China, especially to British plant collectors, and the consequent arrival in Britain of all manner of new and hardy plant material which lent itself to Robinson's methods of treatment and was to change greatly the face of gardening."[25] These were the years in which botanical entrepreneurs like Ernest Henry Wilson (1876–1930), working for British and American commercial and academic organizations, scoured Sichuan province in west China for novelties to form part of a new representation of nature in those countries.

The gardening literature of the period constructs Wilson as a heroic pioneer, struggling with the deviousness of his Chinese employees. One account, published in 1917, speaks of attempts by these assistants to manufacture, with incredible skill, fraudulent botanical specimens to be passed off on Wilson at high prices, and quotes with approval the poet Brett Harte's racist summation of all that was most securely "known" about the nature of the Chinese mind:

> For ways that are dark,
> For tricks that are vain,
> The heathen Chinee is peculiar.[26]

The contrast is starkly drawn between the mendaciously artificial activities of the Chinese and the natural activities of the agent of the Arnold Arboretum.

There is surely a powerful irony here, and one paralleled in several other fields of the Orientalist project. Just as the canons of Chinese art required Western scholars to enunciate them, so nature in China required rescuing from the fantastical ministrations of Chinese gardeners, men into whose natures the poison of artificiality had deeply entered. Those camellias which

[23] "Contorted Coniferous Trees," *Gardener's Chronicle,* 4 July 1896.

[24] J. Wolschke-Bulmahn, "The 'Wild Garden' and the 'Nature Garden': Aspects of the Garden Ideology of William Robinson and Willy Lange," *Journal of Garden History* 12, 3 (1992), 183–206.

[25] H. R. Fletcher, *The Story of the Royal Horticultural Society, 1804–1968,* Oxford, 1969, 231.

[26] *Gardener's Chronicle,* 22 December 1917, 250.

risked torture and degradation in the East could be transported to the Home Counties, there to form part of an unproblematic nature which in fact celebrated British imperial hegemony over a large part of the globe. The irony is powerfully apparent in a *cri de coeur* published in *The Garden Magazine* in 1918, by which time ideas of the necessity of relying on local plants had penetrated the consciousness of amateur gardeners all over the Anglo-American world, as well as in northern Europe. Writing from near Shanghai, a member of the expatriate community, one G. L. Hagman, complains:

> We read *The Garden Magazine* with great profit as gardening is our hobby and recreation aside from supplying our table with food the year round, and providing flowers for the sick as well as ourselves. We continually see mention of Wilson's "finds" in China and wish we might profit by the information gained by his and others' scientific efforts here. Is there a report of the desirable things with the location in China and any information as to where we ourselves can get these things here? If he has the Chinese names for these things it would be of help in securing them here.

The editor's response is to complain: "Unfortunately, so far as we know, there is no such thing as a Chinese nurseryman. . . . It is doubtful whether the plants have universal Chinese names, as they came chiefly from the interior regions of western China."[27] The alienation of the Chinese from nature is now complete, in that they cannot even give coherent names to the plants which grow there, and nature must remain inchoate until rendered tractable by the skill and dedication of the Western scientist. The glories of the Chinese flora are added to the long list of Western "discoveries," like Asia or the Americas themselves, which the ignorance of indigenous peoples renders them incapable of appreciating.

However, this *reductio ad absurdum* of Orientalist discourse comes in the decade between 1910 and 1920, at a point when attitudes to Chinese culture were undergoing a change which was to revalidate the Chinese garden as one of the great artifacts of that civilization, precisely on account of its closeness to nature. From being despised for their agonistic, cross-grained attitude of conflict with nature, Chinese gardens come to be seen as embodying an essentially harmonious, holistic engagement with nature in a manner shared with the gardens of Japan. How did this reversal come about? What did it mean?

One aspect lies in a revalorization of *early* Chinese art as the cynosure of institutional and private collectors in Europe and America. The fashion for "Japonisme" ebbed strongly after about 1900, as it came to be the opinion of Western writers that many Japanese achievements depended on the transmission of artistic styles to that country from China at a very early period. The Orientalist search for origins, as explaining essences, then led back to the study of early Chinese art. The political upheavals in China following the 1911 republican revolution made more art of an early period available on the international market, as did the progress of railway building, which brought the tomb ceramics of an early era (an art uncollected by Chinese con-

[27] "China Needs Chinese Plants!" *The Garden Magazine* 28 (1918), 75.

noisseurs).[28] Perhaps more important were philosophical currents, particularly the immense popularity across a wide audience of the ideas of the French thinker Henri Bergson. Bergson's theories of "vital spirit" (*élan vital*) as the universal rhythm animating the world and all that is in it were extremely influential not just in his native France but in Britain. Rachel Gotlieb has demonstrated how Bergson's theories were central to the appreciation of early Chinese art in the years during and immediately after the First World War.[29] Valuing intuition, spontaneity, and the unconscious, Bergson's theories clearly had affinities with those of Carl Jung, which were similarly popular in artistic circles in Britain at this period. They were, when applied to Chinese art, also tied to an older social Darwinian notion of flourishing and decline. It was *ancient* China which was to be appreciated (even if unloved by the degenerate Chinese of the present day); modern China was a hopeless case, or rather the terms *modern* and *China* could not coexist as parts of the same proposition. That which was authentic had to be ancient.

We begin, therefore, in garden history writing (whether directly influenced by Bergson or not) to see an interest in the antiquity of the Chinese garden and its essential invariance over time. Invariance over time is of course a quality shared equally in idealist philosophies with "nature" itself. The idea of the struggle against nature disappears from the literature at this point. This is seen even in the work of Marie Louise Gothein, whose *Geschichte der Gartenkunst*, published originally in 1914 and translated into English in 1928, is in so many ways far ahead of its time. The quantity and quality of information she purveys on China is in a different league from anything that has gone before, and it is a desideratum of further research to have a clearer idea of the sources from which she drew it. For example, she gives extensive quotations from early Chinese writers, including one essay which had been available in Jesuit translation since the eighteenth century.[30] Strangely absent from the text, however, is the term "nature" at all. Much of Gothein's chapter on China is in fact a sensitive account of the reception of ideas about Chinese gardens in Europe from Marco Polo onward. She goes on to remark, "From one point of view Chinese art is the purest of all, and the questions of origin and history are most enticing. But there are difficulties which we cannot overcome, since there is no country that shows fewer traces of old historic gardens."[31] She continues: "On the other hand, there is an unexampled continuity about Chinese culture in every department, and not least in gardening. . . . To the Chinese nation the love of what is old is truly a passion. They were not wanting in historical research of every sort, though the unbroken development of centuries offered so little in the way of contrasts that the origin of an art which grew slowly were lost in the darkness of antiquity."[32] The conclusion (though she does not draw it) is that though no *actual* old gardens survive in

[28] For a broad account of these currents in taste, see W. I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture*, New York, 1992, and also my article "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 2, 2 (1994), 318–55.

[29] R. Gotlieb, "'Vitality' in British Art Pottery and Studio Pottery," *Apollo* 127 (1988), 163–67 (an article of more general relevance than its title might suggest).

[30] The text is the "Record of the Garden of Solitary Delight" (*Duleyuan ji*) by Sima Guang (1019–86), available in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences . . . des Chinois*, vol. 2, Paris, 1776–1814, 643–50. However, the sole authority she thanks for "important hints" on the Asian section was Carl Bezold, a noted Assyriologist.

[31] M. L. Gothein, *A History of Garden Art*, reprinted New York, 1979, 239.

[32] Ibid., 240.

China, the gardens visible at the present time are *in essence* unchanged from very remote antiquity (just as nature is now as it ever was). The continuous thread cannot be provided by anything like conscious choice on the part of individual Chinese actors in specific historic circumstances. Instead it is provided by a racial characteristic, the supposed closeness to and empathy for "nature" on the part of "the Chinese," regardless of the contingencies of gender and class.

Writers on gardens from the 1920s onward uniformly ascribe this characteristic to the Japanese as well as to the Chinese. For example, Hubbard and Kimball's *Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design* of 1924, which contains no mention of China whatsoever, compares Japanese gardens to the European "Romantic" style, and asserts:

> but whereas the western Romantic landscape style was a sudden unreasoning outburst of revolt against previous oppression, which arose, ran to absurdity, and died down within less than a century, the Japanese styles are the expression of a racial feeling and reverence for Nature, wrought out, conventionalised, and symbolised through a period of over a thousand years, by successive generations of artists, who, unlike the designers of the Romantic style, produced almost invariably symbols of intrinsically beautiful form.[33]

The contrast at first glance appears to be drawn to the credit of "the Japanese," but it is done so within an Orientalist rhetoric which effectively says that Americans and Europeans do things, Asians just "are." Western artists struggle and sometimes fail, Eastern artists "almost invariably" produce beauty, not because of conscious actions, but because they are themselves subsumed into that nature which the Western political and intellectual tradition acts upon.

From this point on, the proposition that East Asians are invariably and uniformly close to nature hovers behind all descriptions of Chinese and Japanese gardens, now invariably seen as naturalistic in style. To multiply examples unnecessarily would be tedious, and a few comments must stand in for many. In an article of 1925, significantly entitled "Twenty Centuries of Gardening in China," H. H. Manchester writes, "it is evident that the central principle of the Chinese garden almost a thousand years ago was to include a variety of the most striking, interesting and beautiful scenes of nature."[34] H. Stuart Ortloff, in his *Informal Gardens: The Naturalistic Style*, of 1933, remarks, "the Japanese . . . have a garden art that is built upon a rigid and almost slavish regard for Nature."[35] The widely read *Short History of Gardens*, published in the same year by H. N. Wethered (and explicitly indebted to Gothein), claims, "We realise at any rate that the leading idea of the Chinese gardens was to epitomise nature, to present her in all her various moods with a due sense of proportion."[36] By 1960 the distinguished landscape architect G. A. Jellicoe could take it as a truism that, "It [the Chinese garden] was an art based upon a philosophy that man was a part of organic nature and just like nature did not change after having reached a "climax." It was undoubtedly extremely restful and contented."[37] The contrast with views equally universally

[33] H. V. Hubbard and T. Kimball, *An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design*, New York, 1924, 55.

[34] H. H. Manchester, "Twenty Centuries of Gardening in China," *Garden Magazine and Home Builder* 25 (1925), 404.

[35] H. S. Orloff, *Informal Gardens: The Naturalistic Style*, New York, 1933, 272.

[36] H. N. Wethered, *A Short History of Gardens*, London, 1933, 272.

[37] G. A. Jellicoe, *Studies in Landscape Design*, London and New York, 1960, 29.

held a century earlier is now absolute. Yet the change derives not from actual changes in the forms of specific gardens in China (though such, if little understood, undoubtedly occurred). It is a change deriving from alterations to the manner in which "the East" is generated in discourse, discourse which works to reinforce the secure identity of "the West."

As well as general histories of the garden on a worldwide basis, the period between the wars saw the appearance of the first monographs in Western languages devoted to the Chinese garden. These if anything strengthen the synecdochic relationship whereby the nature of the garden *is* the nature of the Chinese: "In China a garden is more than a place of peace and a projected dream; it is the embodiment of a philosophy of life. The harmonies and subtle rhythms reflect the mutations of a vaster cosmic scheme."[38] A collection of essays originally published in 1940 includes one (much cited down to the present) on the theme of "Man and Nature in the Chinese Garden," by the eminent historian of thought Wing-tsit Chan. Here "nature" is as much as elsewhere rendered in an unproblematic manner as a transcendent given.[39] Osvald Sirén, in what is perhaps the most widely available monograph until quite recently, states on his opening page that, "the Chinese garden is an expression of artistic ideas and conceptions that have emerged from an intimate feeling for Nature . . . the Chinese garden has retained a more intimate contact with untrammelled Nature."[40]

This association of the Chinese garden with "nature" remains largely unchallenged. However, it may be productive to consider the manner in which Chinese scholars within the country began in the earlier part of this century to construct an alternative discourse of garden history entirely around architecture.[41] Take the case of Suzhou, the city in the lower Yangtze delta known to foreigners at least since the 1930s as "the garden city,"[42] an appellation it retains within the Chinese tourist industry to this day. It enjoys an equally prominent role in Dorothy Graham's book of 1938, although it is relatively easy to demonstrate that Suzhou was not in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries particularly renowned for its gardens.[43] It is therefore not without significance that when in 1936 the pioneering Chinese architectural historian Liu Dunzhen visited Suzhou, he went out of his way to dismiss as insignificant the very gardens which Nance and Graham were in the process of canonizing as the "great Chinese gardens." He found only four sites to visit, and remarks, "The first two are entirely commonplace in layout, and have no special features worth noting."[44] The conflict is surely one founded on Liu's refusal to accept the Western tourist's appropriation of China's cultural heritage in a form meeting essentially Western needs. Liu is not ignorant of the enthusiasm American and European writers felt for the Suzhou

[38] D. Graham, *Chinese Gardens: Gardens of the Contemporary Scene, an Account of Their Design and Symbolism*, New York, 1938. These are in fact the opening sentences of this, the very first book on the subject in English.

[39] Wing-tsit Chan, "Man and Nature in the Chinese Garden," in H. Inn, *Chinese Houses and Gardens*, ed. Shao Chang Lee, rev. ed., New York, 1950.

[40] Osvald Sirén, *Gardens of China*, New York, 1949, 3.

[41] This forms the subject of innovative research currently under way by Stanislaus Fung of the University of Adelaide.

[42] F. R. Nance, *Soochow: The Garden City*, Shanghai, 1936, seems to be the first guidebook to employ the term.

[43] This point is discussed in the conclusion to my book *Fruitful Sites*.

[44] Liu Dunzhen, *Suzhou gu jianzhu diaocha ji*, Zhongguo yingzao xueshe, Beiping, 1936, 3.

gardens; he simply rejects the ordering of cultural priorities it implies, and with it rejects the manner in which "nature" is deployed by them.

Underpinning all that I have written is the position that, not only are there no *non*ideological uses of nature, but that there can be no meaningful opposition of nature to ideology at any level. Nature is itself an ideological proposition, and one of stable reference in neither time nor place. The nature which J. C. Loudon saw as violated in every act of the Chinese gardener is not the same nature which a recent writer in *Organic Gardening* saw as married to horticulture and art in the "living sculpture" of bonsai.[45] As with the proposition "mankind," which it in so many ways resembles, attempts to position oneself outside a discourse of "nature" while examining it as an unchanging constant acted on by a volatile "ideology" are bound to fail. However, clear discontinuities in this discourse over time can be made to present themselves for inspection, as when the same tortured dwarf pines of China reappear as the pointers toward an organic utopia.

[45] S. Meyer, "Living Sculpture: Bonsai Is the Marriage of Nature, Horticulture and Art," *Organic Gardening* 1 (1991), 55.