

DUNEDIN CHINESE GARDENS TRUST



A Synopsis of the Culture of Chinese Gardens

**Prepared by Malcolm Wong – Chairman of the Dunedin Chinese Gardens Trust
(February 2009)**

Introduction

In his book *Yuan Ye*, which was completed in 1634, Ji Cheng wrote that although the garden is made with the hand of man it must look as though it was made in heaven.

To fully understand the concept of the Chinese garden is to understand how the Chinese view the universe. This may seem a bold statement but over two thousand years of history gives it some credence.

What then makes this so and why have Chinese gardens so fascinated the West? When did this fascination begin and why can't these Gardens be recreated by western gardeners?

In the 1920's an educated Chinese gentleman, on visiting Europe, commented when shown a "mown and bordered lawn which, while no doubt would be of interest to a cow, offers no interest to human beings". Therein lies the fundamental difference in gardening between East and West. Chinese build gardens whereas the West plant gardens. However, if the difference was as simple as that to master, Chinese gardens would have been replicated with ease by the great western landscape architects.

The fascination by the West of things Chinese began on the eve of 1699 when the Court of France held a Chinese festival to commemorate the coming new year. The term "chinoiserie" was coined at this time and so began the West's great desire for all things Chinese. This interest included porcelain, artwork, furniture and ceramics and then extended to gardening.

Prior to this time European gardens were essentially two dimensional designs. With the Chinese influence they became less structured and more natural. But they fell well short of becoming Chinese gardens.

What then makes a Chinese garden so innately Chinese?

Chinese garden design is very much a living art form and draws on the three ways of thought (Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism) which have so influenced Chinese culture including their outlook on the world for nigh on two thousand years or more. Garden design also has its roots in Chinese landscape painting. All of these elements have combined to ensure that gardens became a physical extension of all that the Chinese have learnt and studied and came to appreciate.

It is because of these factors that unless you have been trained, studied in the ways of the above as well as being Chinese it is impossible to recreate the unique feeling of peacefulness, tranquility of a Chinese garden.

Early Gardens, Poets and Imperial Influences



As the rulers of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ they considered themselves, literally, the “sons of heaven” and their mandate came from heaven itself. The great hunting parks of the early Chinese emperors were built to impress all those they conquered.

The emperor Qin Shi Huang Di’s great hunting parks and collections served to show that he was indeed ruler of all. He also became obsessed with the notion of immortality.

The Han emperors to follow were no different and in the parks they saw a powerful symbol of the majesty of their rule. They set the great poets and calligraphers of their age to write and immortalise their parks and gardens. It was the great Han emperor Wudi who gave the gardens a new dimension that makes Chinese gardens like no other.

He, too, was fascinated with the idea of immortality but instead of trying to find the home of the famed immortals (as Qin Shi Huang tried to do) he sought to lure them to him by embellishing his gardens with lakes, blossoms and animals so fabulous that they would think that his garden was their own home. To this day Chinese gardens have that element of romantic mysticism or lyrical magic about them.

Other early gardens of the Tang dynasty scholars and poets such as Wang Wei’s 8th century Wangchuan Villa may not have been as carefully crafted as those of the later Ming dynasty gardens but they nevertheless had that feeling of serenity and romantic mysticism about them as befitting a scholar’s residence. They were not as grand and impressive as Imperial gardens nor should they be for they were scholar’s gardens.

Scholars often wrote about, composed poems and painted each other including their gardens. Gardens were an extension of the owners personality and so were very much part of the scholar's psyche. It was important for the scholar's spiritual advancement that they should be surrounded by an environment appropriate to the Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist ways of thought.

Chinese landscape painting and its influence on Garden design



Wang Wei's Wangchuan Villa

In order to see Chinese gardens as the Chinese understand them it is necessary to have some appreciation of Chinese landscape paintings and how their composition influenced garden design particularly with regard to rock formations.

Ji Cheng wrote in his book, “give me a blank white-washed wall and I will paint it with plants and rocks”. Ji Cheng was himself a well known painter prior to writing what was to become the leading treatise on garden design.

When Yuan Ye was translated by Alison Hardie and published by the Yale University Press in 1988, Maggie Keswick (author of *The Chinese Garden*) wrote that “As a painter and connoisseur, Ji Cheng would also, however unconsciously, in gardens as in art, have looked for a quality described as *qi yun sheng tong*. This, the ‘first principle’ of painting was formulated by Xie He in the sixth century AD”. Translated it has come to mean “animation through spirit consonance. (This) means two things: first that the *qi* or ‘vital spirit’ of every part of a painting must ‘vibrate’ with the *qi* of every other part; second, that the *qi* of the painted forms must respond to that of the real forms as they exist outside the painting”.

What this seems to me to mean is that each part of the painting must be in harmony with each other just as in nature everything co-exists in the same harmonious way. This is important if paintings are to recreate the realism, spirit and rhythm of nature.

Maggie Keswick goes on to say “For garden designers this is immensely important. The garden microcosm is not to be merely a reproduction of nature in miniature, but a poetic, lyrical and artistic interpretation of it, with its own ‘vital spirit.’”

Chinese landscape painting has, itself, held a romantic mysticism in its imagery. In Chinese the word for landscape is made up of the two words for mountain (*shan*) and water (*shui*). That is why these two elements feature so prominently. That there is a strong romanticism about their imagery did not happen by chance. In Chinese mythology

the mountains form the connection between heaven (yin) and earth (yang) and a place where the Chinese immortals would inhabit.

It was therefore a logical extension that the landscape so loved by Chinese painters should then be re-created in living form in Chinese Gardens, not just for the enjoyment of Emperors but for those fortunate to appreciate and to have the where-with-all to re-create their own microcosm of nature in their own home.

By Ji Cheng's time in the late Ming dynasty the "new rich" or merchant class had substantial wealth and wished to show their status in life in an elegant ('ya') manner. After a hectic, but sometimes short, public life the scholars or mandarins also wished to continue with their spiritual advancement and what better way to do this than in a garden which provided him with the atmosphere to do so. In the Ming dynasty, these two desires made the design of elaborate and exquisite gardens highly sought after and some of the best gardens were built during this period.

When one walks through the garden rockeries it is open to each person's imagination as to what he or she feels but the feeling that should be ever present is that he or she should feel that they are a part of a living landscape and that as they meander through the paths that they been shrunk to the size of ants wandering through rockeries which have now become mountains.

Strolling through the garden should therefore give one the impression of being part of a three dimensional Chinese landscape painting. Like landscape paintings Chinese gardens do not seek to re-create whole vast landscapes but rather provide a small vignette of nature in one's own backyard. Yet the look of the garden must surpass that of nature itself therein providing that lyrical aspect.

Gardens owe their immortality not only to their design and construction but also to the famous poets, painters and calligraphers who wrote about and drew them. Famous poets such as Tao Yuanming, Wang Wei, Li Bai, Du Fu and Bo Juyi wrote poems about gardens and mountains which often inspired paintings in their honour only added more romantic mysticism about gardens. Many paintings depicted scholars relaxing or entertaining in their garden. Emperors aspired to be viewed as Scholars posing in their own fabulous gardens.

All these elements of artistic form and expression served to entwine Chinese gardens as an intricate part of the Chinese culture and which in turn led to Chinese garden design being considered as its own separate art form.

The Dao and Buddhism



The Dao, or The Way, is central to Chinese thinking and has its origins as far back as the 6th or 4th century BCE. For Daoists the Way stands for the “*ultimate totality of all things (past, present and future) in its state of continuous transformation and change*”.

Whilst the scholar-official may have been Confucian in his public life many were either daoists or Buddhists in their private life. Confucianism concerned itself with governmental matters, Daoism had its impact on arts, literature and speculative thought.

Central to all Chinese thinking including the Daoist way of thought is the concept of *qi*. Qi is essentially the life force that exists in all things. It is particularly evident in the rhythm of nature, a concept which is essential to garden design. When qi is pure and light it rises to become heaven and if it muddy and heavy it falls to become earth. Through nature and its contemplation the Daoist could practice his beliefs.

Daosits also believed in the concept of yin and yang which also had significant influence on garden design.

Buddhism came to China in about the 1st century CE from India via the Silk Road. China developed their own versions with Zen Buddhism being the most well known in the West although not actually the most popular in China itself. Gardens, plants and nature held special significance for Buddhists. Its art transformed Chinese landscape especially through sculpture, architecture and painting.

Wang Wei (701 – 761 CE), who lived during the Tang dynasty, was a devout Buddhist as well as a Confucian official. His painting of his own Wangchuan villa has been the subject of countless reproductions and is testament to the deep spirituality of his character as well as that of his Garden.

Through the Daoist and Buddhist influences, by the 3rd century CE, a “distinct longing for mountains and water” had developed. Tao Yuanming (365 – 427 CE) was a Daoist poet who shunned public life and lived the life of a recluse. His poems endured himself to many later generations of Chinese.

The Confucian Influence



Why then is there a general pre-occupation with gardens in the Chinese culture? One of the principle ways of thought which has influenced Chinese thinking and actions for well over 2,000 years are the teachings of Confucius (Kong Fuzi).

Confucius lived from 557 – 479 BCE and although during his lifetime his teachings did not find favour it was during the Han dynasty that his philosophy finally became a part of the Chinese society.

Confucius emphasised personal and government morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. Confucian doctrine became the basis for the Government civil service examinations. It was through these examinations that ordinary people by dint of scholarly aptitude could advance himself in Chinese society. Society under Confucian principles was governed by meritocracy.

By the late Ming dynasty / early Ching dynasty the Confucian examinations had been in force for well over 1600 years and they had become so difficult to pass that failed candidates had been known to have been driven mad. The most famous example was Hong Xiuquan who after failing the civil service examinations three times became delusional and thought he was the Chinese brother of Jesus Christ. He led the Taiping rebellion in 1850 which ended in 1864. Reputedly, about 20 million people were thought to have died during this uprising. The civil service examinations based on Confucian principles were finally abandoned in 1911 but they still have their basis in the form of the British Civil Service examinations.

It would be a poor Confucian scholar/official who would neglect his family and duties to go wandering in the hills so what better way to enjoy nature and relax as one was taught to do than by building a garden around him. Summer villas could provide an illusion of escape but as *“one scholar / official remarked ‘if the heart is at peace, why should one not create a wilderness even in the midst of town?’ All that was needed was a high wall to exclude the cares of men”*.

Symbolism and Plants in the Garden

Chinese beliefs make great use of symbols and signs and the homophonic nature of its language has given it a richness and depth not existing in western cultures. For example the word for bat is *“fu”* and fish is *“yu”* which are homophones for wealth and abundance. There are examples of bats (in the concrete lattice work windows and entrance courtyard) in the Dunedin Chinese Garden and of course lots of goldfish in the pond.

Plants in the Chinese Garden are not known for their horticultural rarity but rather for their symbolism.

There are a significant number of bamboo plants in the garden for in Confucianism they represent respectability and compliance, everything that a scholar / gentleman strives to be. A cluster of bamboo comes from one central plant with its extensive root system extending from this one plant. Under Confucian doctrine this is symbolic of the ideal cohesive society.

The three plants which are called the *“Three Friends of Winter”* are the bamboo, pine tree and flowering plum blossom. These are so called because they provide colour and growth during the harsh winter season. Under Confucianism principles they also represent wisdom, friendship, respectability and strength through adversity. The flowering plum blossom is one of the *“four Junzi Flowers”* in China (the others being orchid, chrysanthemums and bamboo) which are used to symbolise nobleness.

Chrysanthemums symbolise the perfect Chinese scholar and are well liked for their autumn bloom. Peonies symbolise wealth and power and the lotus is a symbol of purity.

Climbing roses, camellias, ginkos, magnolias, jasmine, willow, sweet osmanthus and maples are all common feature in a Chinese garden.

Some of you may be wondering how the name, “Lan Yuan”, was picked. The Garden’s name, Lan Yuan, was chosen by our architect Dr. Cao and Prof. Tan Yufeng of the Shanghai Museum. Choosing the right name is most important to the Chinese and much deliberation was done before Lan Yuan was selected.

A literal translation of Lan Yuan means “Orchid Garden” but that is not why our garden was so named. The Chinese name for New Zealand is Xin Xi Lan so the Chinese have taken the last word “Lan” and used this for our Garden’s name as symbolic of the close relationship between China and New Zealand. As the premier authentic Chinese Garden in New Zealand this is auspicious as the Chinese consider no other garden in New Zealand can use Lan in its name with this meaning. The word Lan is also symbolic of the connection between our sister city of Shanghai and Dunedin as the civic flower of Shanghai is the Yu Lan (white magnolia) and Dunedin is also well known for its magnolias. The name has therefore a deep symbolic meaning connecting both countries and cities together for all posterity.

There is a Yu Lan tree in Garden just by the small northern terrace next to the “male feature rock”.

Rocks and water in Our Chinese Garden



The exquisiteness of the Dunedin Chinese garden has been assured with the use of Taihu lake rock sourced from China. The Taihu garden rocks have been used in Chinese artwork since the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). Consequently they have been highly sought after. During the Soong Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) they were the most highly sought after object d’art in the whole of China. By the Ming Dynasty large feature Taihu rocks had become quite rare. Taihu lake rocks are the main type of garden rock used as features in the Suzhou Chinese gardens.

The Taihu rock comes from Lake (‘Hu’) Tai which is situated west of Suzhou on the border of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and is China’s third largest freshwater lake. Taihu rock is a type of sedimentary limestone and is only found in this one place in China. New Zealand has no rock of this type (we have looked). Taihu rocks are especially prized because of their shape and form. The natural cracks and crevasses are reminiscent of mountains in real life. The small grottos in the artificial mountain are to symbolic of caves in real mountains. The caves provide shelters which the Chinese immortals can use and be comforted.

Therefore to have about 970 tonnes of Taihu rock in our garden makes the garden very special.

In China the common phrase for making a garden means “*digging ponds and piling mountains*”.

The Chinese garden design is, therefore, about balance and harmony and the water is the ‘yin’ to the rocks ‘yang’. Without the water to soften the harshness of the rock the balance of the garden would be lost.

In Chinese philosophy the water represents the wise scholar who, like the water, will eventually find his own level in life.

The use of water has been important from a design aspect because of the small overall size of the garden (about 3,000 square metres from wall to wall) it was necessary to make maximum use of the water to give the allusion of space (Cao Yongkang highlights this aspect in his chapter “*A Garden of Distant Longing*” in our book “*Lan Yuan – Garden of Enlightenment*”).

The water will eventually have a muted green colour which does not mean it is stagnant (as water is continually flowing) but is due to the promotion of algae growth. The ‘*jade water*’ adds to the overall atmosphere and tranquility of the garden and further softens the look of the water. It also serves to hide the fish and give the allusion of depth to the pond.

Architecture of the Chinese Garden



Chinese build gardens whereas in the West gardeners plant gardens. Being a part of the scholar’s home it would not be fitting without at least a passing comment on the architecture of the Chinese garden.

Chinese traditional buildings are built on four main platforms; the floor, columns, braces and roof. The buildings in Lan Yuan are built in the traditional manner using mortise and tenon joints which have been found in Chinese furniture since the 4th Century BCE. No nails are used to hold the structures together.

The wood used is *Cunninghamia lanceolata*, commonly known as Chinese Fir, similar to New Zealand spruce. It is light yet insect resistant and was aged for six months prior to construction. There are about four coats of stain and three coats of lacquer used.

The pavilions are typical Jiangnan style as evidenced by the upswept eaves and deep verandahs. The main pavilions feature couplets (on the columns) and passages of Chinese prose (above the door or between the couplets as in the entrance pavilion). These were

chosen by the Chinese architect, Dr. Cao Yongkang, to add further to the garden's symbolism and meaning.

An open pavilion is called a *ting* and can be any shape (square, round, hexagonal, octagonal, quatrefoil (begonia) or fan-shaped) with a large roof and upturned roof corners.

A building by the water with windows all around is a *xie*. A large hall is a *tang* and a small one a *quan* or *xuan*. A two-story structure is a *lou*; one with windows all around on the second floor is a *ge*. Covered walkways are *lang* and a balustraded terrace on the water is a *tai*.



Lan Yuan February 2009



The pavilion or *ting* by the zig-zag bridge was given the name *chongyuan* by the our Shanghai designers which means the “*heart of the lake pavilion*”. This was so named to symbolise the longing that one may have for their homeland and in particular the local Chinese who have emigrated from parts of China can gaze “upstream” and reminisce about the land of their birth or their families roots.

Presenter's comments

When I first started on this project some twelve years ago I was indeed a 'Chinese Garden virgin'. Outwardly I look Chinese but I really knew nothing about my culture. Being involved with the Garden project has been a fascinating project and a watershed as far as learning something about my heritage. As part of the Trust's presentation team I have had all this information swimming around in my head. So I was pleased to be asked to speak to the volunteers as it spurred me to put pen to paper (or fingers to the key board).

In the eyes of the mainland Chinese I could never be seen as being “Chinese”. I will always be, to them, a New Zealander of Chinese ethnicity but that doesn't worry me unduly as it pretty accurately describes who I am and I am proud to be so considered.

I write this presentation not as an expert on Chinese gardens for although I have delved into Chinese Garden history over an eleven year period it has not been more than as a keen amateur history buff (with a vested interest). Through the eyes of the Chinese eleven years is not a long time. The celebrated Qing Dynasty painter Zheng Ban Qiao spent a lifetime painting bamboo and in his words he reckoned, in the end, he still hadn't got it

right but he had a wonderful life doing so. Like the garden project I am still growing in knowledge but I am pleased to pass on what little I have gleaned to others.

I hope that those who have been to this presentation and who have read this material will continue with their interest in Chinese Gardens and culture. I have found it a fascinating and enlightening journey so far. I would recommend you to read the short book edited by James Beattie on 'Lan Yuan – the Garden of Enlightenment' and in particular the chapter by Dr. Cao Yongkang on the intricacies of Chinese Garden design and also James's chapter giving a brief history of Chinese Gardens in the West and also the story behind our Garden and the reason for building it (to honour the early Chinese immigrants to Otago and their contribution and to celebrate the continuing Chinese involvement in this city's rich tapestry). These are stories in themselves.

In this presentation I have only touched on the above topics and in particular the construction, design, engineering and plants which are covered in more detail by other presenters.

As I am writing this tonight I see that Lan Yuan even features on Wikipedia on the internet and so the enlightenment goes on.....

As a volunteer and/or friend I hope you will continue with this journey of enlightenment, I know I will. The Chinese have a saying " When you build a garden it must be winding but when you make friends you must be straight"

I list below the reference books I have used. Some of which I have quoted from extensively. I am grateful for the opportunity to have studied these books and to pass these titles on to those interested.

Bibliography

The Craft of Gardens (Yuan Ye) by Ji Cheng translated by Alison Hardie, published by Yale University Press 1988 (now out of Print). Copy secured through the internet from Abe Books

A Chinese Garden Court – The Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong.

Chinese Gardens by Lou Qingxi. Translated by Zheng Lei & Yu Hong

China published by Darling Kindersley Limited, New York 2007. Edited by Paula Regan

On Chinese Gardens by Chen Congzhou, published by Tongji University Press, Shanghai, China

The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000BC - AD 2000 by Julia Lovell

Wikipedia – Chinese_ garden

Timeline: Chinese garden design history



Like West Asia and Europe, China has three primary types of enclosed, vegetated, outdoor space: hunting parks, domestic gardens and religious gardens. Though the hunting parks have vanished, the great imperial landscape parks which are their close relatives survive (eg the West Lake and Beihai). Ordered domestic courtyards, made under the influence of Confucius, remain in old Chinese towns. Stylised representations of the natural world made by scholars under the influence of Taoism and Buddhism have become famous as 'Chinese gardens'.

c600 BCE [Lao Tzu](#)

563-483 BCE [Buddha](#)

551-479 BCE [Confucius](#)

500 BCE [Tiger Hill](#)

300 BCE Chinese lacquer paintings (on bronze) showing huntsmen, possibly in hunting parks (see Chinese characters for Tree and Park, from a seal script)

240 BCE Shang-lin Hunting Park at [Ch'ang an](#)

68 CE Buddhism reaches China and first Buddhist temple in [Luoyang](#)

604 CE Lo-yang Pleasure Park at [Luoyang](#)

612 CE Ono-no-Imoko visits China as an emissary from Japan (see [chronology of Japanese gardens](#))

1000 CE Chinese landscape painting became established. Mi Fu (or Mi Fei 1051-1107), took a rock as his 'brother' and bow to it each day. He created the "Mi style" of ink-wash landscape painting and was a great calligrapher.

1044 CE The [Surging Waves Pavilion](#) in Suzhou

1126 Juchen capture Hangzhou and the [West Lake](#) developed as a landscape park

c1200 CE [Beihai Park](#) in Beijing

1275 CE Marco Polo visits China and describes the [Forbidden City and Hangzhou](#)

1421 CE Beijing becomes the capital of China

1440 The [Master-of-Fishing Nets Garden](#) in Suzhou

1703 The [Imperial Summer Mountain Resort](#) in Chengde

1872 Hu [Xue-yan Villa](#) (Hu Xueyan Garden)

Source: Free eBook

Chinese History Timeline

Dates	Dynasty	朝代
ca. 2000-1500 B.C.	Xia	夏
1700-1027 B.C.	Shang	商
1027-771 B.C.	Western Zhou	西周
770-221 B.C.	Eastern Zhou	東周
	770-476 B.C. -- Spring and Autumn period	春秋時代
	475-221 B.C. -- Warring States period	戰國時代
221-207 B.C.	Qin	秦
206 B.C.-A.D. 9	Western Han	西漢
A.D. 9-24	Xin (Wang Mang interregnum)	新
A.D. 25-220	Eastern Han	東漢
A.D. 220-280	Three Kingdoms	三國
	220-265 -- Wei	魏
	221-263 -- Shu	蜀
	229-280 -- Wu	吳
A.D. 265-316	Western Jin	西晉
A.D. 317-420	Eastern Jin	東晉
A.D. 420-588	Southern and Northern Dynasties	南北朝

	420-588	Southern Dynasties	南朝
		420-478 -- Song	宋
		479-501 -- Qi	齊
		502-556 -- Liang	梁
		557-588 -- Chen	陳
	386-588	Northern Dynasties	北朝
		386-533 -- Northern Wei	北魏
		534-549 -- Eastern Wei	東魏
		535-557 -- Western Wei	西魏
		550-577 -- Northern Qi	北齊
		557-588 -- Northern Zhou	北周
A.D. 581-617	Sui		隋
A.D. 618-907	Tang		唐
A.D. 907-960	Five Dynasties		五代
	907-923 -- Later Liang		後梁
	923-936 -- Later Tang		後唐
	936-946 -- Later Jin		後晉
	947-950 -- Later Han		後漢
	951-960 -- Later Zhou		後周
A.D. 907-979	Ten Kingdoms		十國

A.D. 960-1279	Song	宋
	960-1127 -- Northern Song	北宋
	1127-1279 -- Southern Song	南宋
A.D. 916-1125	Liao	遼
A.D. 1038-1227	Western Xia	西夏
A.D. 1115-1234	Jin	金
A.D. 1279-1368	Yuan	元
A.D. 1368-1644	Ming	明
A.D. 1644-1911	Qing	清
A.D. 1911-1949	Republic of China (in mainland China)	中華民國
A.D. 1949-	Republic of China (in Taiwan)	
A.D. 1949-	People's Republic of China	中華人民共和國

Source: www-chaos.umd.edu/history/time_line.html