

Chinese and Japanese Gardens: Comparative Design Elements of Beijing and Kyoto Gardens

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中国と日本の庭園様式の比較研究 -北京と京都の庭園の発生と起源

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Abstract

The article discusses the relationship between the structural design of Chinese and Japanese gardens. The design of gardens in Beijing and Kyoto are compared, and their significant similarities and differences are identified. Fundamental to these differences are the contrasting religious and philosophical perceptions of nature instrumental in generating and shaping these unique examples of garden design. The article concludes that these fundamental perceptions in the design of oriental gardens clearly indicate that unlike Western gardens, which are essentially functional, Japanese gardens are primarily spiritual, and Chinese gardens are both functional and spiritual.

要 約

本論文では、中国と日本の庭園様式を概観すると同時に、中国の北京市と日本の京都府にある代表的な庭園を詳細に比較研究した。宗教と哲学は、庭園様式の形成と成熟の過程で重要な役割を果たしている。その宗教と哲学の影響は、西洋の庭園様式をより機能的な方向へと発展させ、日本の庭園に於いては、深遠な精神の象徴として発展し、中国庭園では、その両方を含む機能的かつ精神的な要素を含む庭園様式へと発展させた。

1. The Original Philosophical Approach Towards Chinese Gardens

Unlike Egyptian gardens, which can be studied by means of ancient illustrations (Figure 1) and unlike Persian gardens, which can be studied through the reconstruction of ancient ruins (Figure 2, a & b), early Chinese gardens can be studied only from their written descriptions.

Historical records indicate that the first Far Eastern garden existed in China during the Shang

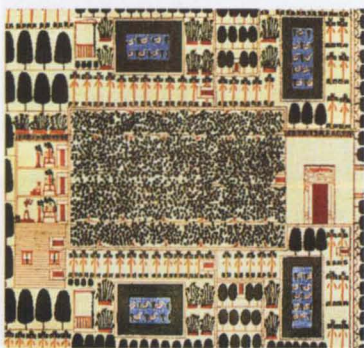


Figure 1



Figure 2a

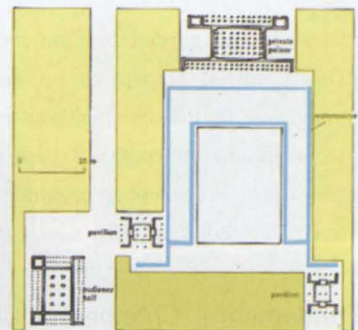


Figure 2b

Dynasty (c.1600-c.1027 BC). This *Yuan*, or hunting garden, measuring up to 200 kilometers in length, was designed for the pleasure of emperors. This vast garden or park made use of an existing natural site though extra trees and plants as well as forest animals, birds, and fish which were added from time to time. However, no overall design changes were made, nor were man-made objects introduced until many centuries later (Wang 2).

As in Persia, the early Chinese emperors enclosed their hunting gardens. A diagram of an early garden in a written character is one of the first ways in which the word *yuan* “garden” was etched on ancient bronze in 1500 BC. It includes four tree characters in a square to symbolize the enclosed wall (Figure 3).



Figure 3

The philosophical approach evident in this garden of the East and of others like it was distinctly different from that of the West, where gardens functioned as “open-air rooms,” a trend in Europe, which continued for many centuries. Because of this different approach towards nature, Oriental gardens were distinctly different. The main religion in Asia was animism, so that nature was thought of as the materialization of spirits. For Asians, the main purpose in life was to be in harmony with nature. “Humans model themselves on earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the way, and the way on that which is naturally so,” avowed Lao-tzu, the Chinese philosopher and Taoist (De Bary 52). Taoist ideas and images inspired the Chinese love of nature and ultimately their love of gardens. Another equally important Chinese philosopher, Confucius, said, “The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills.” This pleasure of the wise and virtuous has created the phrase “hills and water,” which in turn has become both for China and for Japan the term for “landscape” (Kuck 46).

Confucian tradition served as the ethical and moral basis of Chinese society, its institutions, the organization of the Chinese Empire, and the mandate for the proper exercise of political power by its rulers. Taoism, while not radically subversive, offered a range of alternatives to the Confucian way of life. That is why Taoism is also called “the other way.” Both philosophies helped to shape Chinese culture and Chinese garden design. The clear duality of Chinese gardens, namely being both functional and spiritual, demonstrates these influences. This binary aspect distinguishes Chinese gardens from not only Japanese gardens but also, as Sullivan describes, from Western gardens. He says,

The Chinese garden is a microcosm; it unfolds in time, like the Chinese landscape hand scroll that we slowly unroll as we go on an imaginary journey amid mountains and lakes. The European ideal, embodied in Picturesque, was precisely what the word implies, a series of carefully composed pictures from chosen viewpoints - here a Poisson from chosen viewpoints - here a Poisson, next a Salvador Rosa. The Chinese concept is organic, at least apparently natural; the European is static, and its very artificiality a virtue (Sullivan 113).

2. Fundamental Changes in Chinese Garden Design

A dramatic change in approach took place in 607 AD when Emperor Yang Ti of the Sui Dynasty

(581-618) ordered the construction of an amazing park near his new capital Lo-yang. To build this Xi Yuan, or Western Garden, over one million workers were employed. They constructed artificial hills and lakes, as well as sixteen palace complexes in an area of one hundred square kilometers (Wang 6).

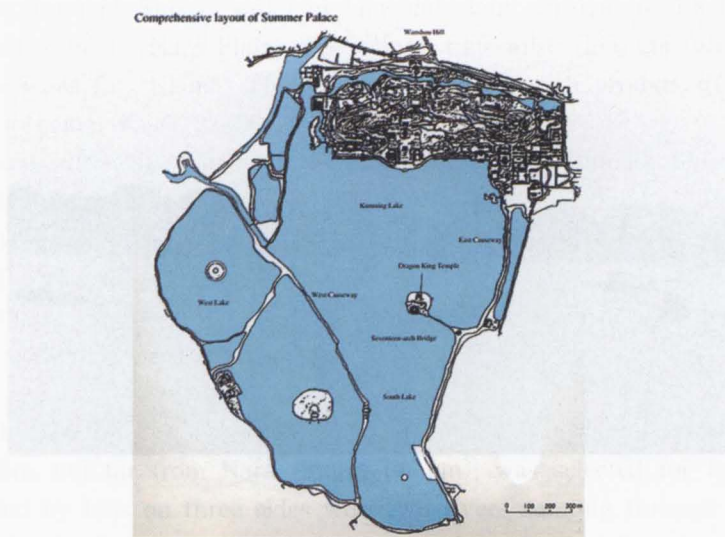


Figure 4

Built by Emperor Qianlong in 1750, the Summer Palace Garden, located about 10 kilometers outside Beijing, is the surviving visual replica of the Western Garden (Figure 4). This garden was almost completely destroyed by Anglo-French troops in 1860, during the Second Opium War, but a rebuilding program was started in 1880 by Empress Dowager Cixi, who used the money that had been reserved for the construction of a modern navy. In 1900 Western troops again attempted to destroy the Summer Palace Garden, and although serious damage was done, the palace garden remained recognizable. The much needed restoration work did not begin until after 1949. Qing yi yuan (The Garden of Clear Ripples), located in the northwestern suburb of Yanjing (Present-day Beijing), was originally used as a summer residence and, therefore, became known as the Summer Palace. The entire area includes the palace quarters, the residential quarters and scenic areas. This immense park is approximately 290 hectares, three-fourths of it being Kunming Lake (Figure 5). Emperor Qianlong enlarged the site considerably in the 18th century. One hundred thousand laborers were used to expand and deepen Kunming Lake. At the edge of the lake sits a souvenir of Empress Dowager Cixi, a beautiful but immobile marble boat (Figure 6) that could not resist the Western navy's attack in 1900 (Cheng 140-44).

The building complexes and pavilions on the bank of the lake provide not only locations for viewing different perspectives, but also their own reflective effects provide visual scenery for those



Figure 5



Figure 6

boating on the huge lake. A seventeen-arch bridge on the opposite side connects a sizable island (Temple of Dragon King) and the Spacious Pavilion on the east bank. It is the longest stone bridge ever built in Chinese gardens, measuring 150 meters (Figure 7).



Figure 7

The Long Corridor is also the longest walkway ever built in Chinese gardens (Figure 8). It measures 728 meters and is divided into 273 equal bays with four octagonal pavilions, which serve not only as resting and viewing spots, but also as breaks in the monotony of the walkway.

Unlike Japanese Zen gardens, which are made to be seen from inside, a person actually walking in these gardens would be dwarfed by their vastness. Chinese gardens are generally appreciated best from a distance by roaming through their corridors and boating on their lakes. That is also why roofed walkways are so common in Chinese gardens, and that is why, unlike Japanese gardens, the lakes of Chinese gardens are so large. The Summer Palace is the best known of Chinese gardens reflecting these characteristics, and is also one of the most famous gardens in the world.



Figure 8

3. The Continuation of Chinese Garden Design in Japan

By the end of the 6th century, almost every element of the original Chinese garden design had been changed except for the basic garden elements which were later transformed through the inspiration of Zen Buddhism, and can be seen today only in Japan. Up until the 6th century, when it was still a primitive kingdom, Japan received most of its information about Chinese civilization indirectly through Korea, which had earlier been a Chinese colony. However, in 607 AD, the first

official Japanese ambassador, Ono no Imoko, arrived in the Sui capital. He certainly did not miss the construction of the Western Park because there are records that a lake garden in front of the Japanese Imperial Palace was constructed only four years after this visit. This event marks the beginning of direct influence of Chinese garden design on Japanese culture.

In 612 AD, upon Empress Suiko's order, a lake-and-island garden in the Chinese manner was created around her palace on the Nara Plain. For a long time after this, the term used for landscape garden was *shima*, the word for "island." This basic design became a prominent pattern for Japanese gardens for centuries to come (Kuck 22-23).

Originally, Japanese rulers lived in a simple house, much like the Ise Shrine, a simple wooden structure, which was discarded after their death. The new ruler would build a different one in its place or in another location. This changed in 710 when a carefully laid-out city, like the Chinese T'ang capital, was built on the rice fields of the Nara Plain. Nara continued to be the capital of Japan for another seventy-five years. Gardens in Nara, like the city itself, were constructed as much like their Chinese prototypes as possible. Their basic elements were a large pond, an island, rocks, and trees (La Plante 36).

No one knows why this new city was abandoned as the capital city of Japan after only 75 years. Nevertheless, a new site, not far from Nara (about 50 km), was selected for the capital. It was a circular area surrounded by hills on three sides with two rivers running through a cup-shaped valley. The new capital was first called Heian-kyo, but because of its long history it gradually came to be known as the capital Miyako. It is now called Kyoto.

Like Nara, Kyoto's layout was heavily influenced by Chinese culture. In 800 AD, a large Chinese style lake-and-island landscape was created to the south of the present Imperial Palace. It was the largest and the finest garden in the capital, with hills and a large pavilion surrounded by willow, maple, and cherry trees. Tragically, this place was destroyed during the Japanese civil wars.

4. The Transformation of Chinese Garden Design in Japan

In order to understand Japanese gardens of later periods, it is necessary to note changes in Japanese society during those periods. First, there was a change in the socio-political structure with the establishment of the warrior class, which set a masculine tone to the age and encouraged the aesthetics of frugality. Second, there was development in the cultural environment, which was influenced by a different great wave of Chinese religious ideas, particularly Zen Buddhism.

Zen's appeal, according to Suzuki, is partly due "to the empirical proclivity of the Chinese mentality and partly to its craving for mysticism," and "the intuitive mode of understanding" (Suzuki 50).

Unlike Persian gardens, which are meant to create a seemingly out-of-reach and imaginary space, Japanese gardens have traditionally been designed to represent nature as it is. In Japan, from this tradition evolved the technique of capturing natural scenery alive that is *shakkei*, or "borrowing" the surrounding nature as part of the garden. Surrounded by mountains, Kyoto has topography ideally suited for *shakkei*.

While the military government in Kamakura was flourishing, nobles in Kyoto were facing a loss of income, except for the Saionji branch of the Fujiwaras. Saneuji, the head of this family, received great wealth and power for his service at the Kamakura court. He acquired a fine estate, later to be known as Kitayama-dono, at the foot of some low, wooded hills just north of Kyoto. Its garden, with a large lake, was one of the last of the Chinese style lake gardens to be built. It became the site on which stood the Rokuon-ji, which because of its gilded pavilion is now known as Kinkaku-ji (Figure 9) or the Golden Pavilion (Earle 63-66).

In 1394, Yoshimitsu, the third Shogun of the Ashikaga line, a sincere student of Zen, began the building of his Kitayama-den villa to serve as his study. Later the structure was changed into a Zen Buddhist temple, Rokuon-ji. Though it was destroyed a few times by fire, the last in 1950, an exact

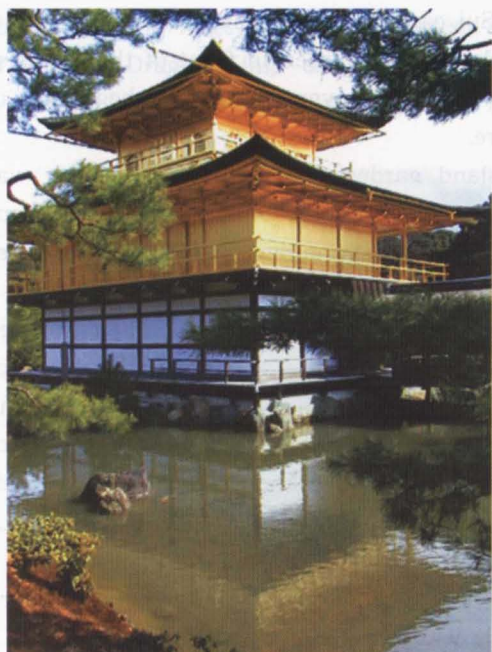


Figure 9



Figure 10

replica was built in 1955. The three-storey temple in the Chinese style is one of the most elaborate among Japanese garden buildings. According to the original design, the perspectives of the Heian pond garden changed dramatically and continuously when viewed from boats moving on the lake, as was the case in Chinese gardens. However, this way of appreciating the garden changed, through the influence of Zen Buddhism to one of quiet contemplation of single aspects of the garden as, for example, water entering the pond from a high, rocky cascade extending from the hillside. The cascade rockwork is a reminder of Sung style rock arrangement in China (Figure 10).

Ashigawa Yoshimasa, the eighth Shogun and Yoshimitsu's grandson, decided to retire at twenty-nine and to construct a villa where he could concentrate on his interest in the arts. He chose a site at the foot of the hills on the eastern edge of Kyoto. The initial construction of the Higashiyama-dono, or the East Mountain Villa, took about eight years and was interrupted by the Onin war (1467-1477). The construction continued after this but ended with Yoshimasa's death in 1490, so the pavilion would never receive its intended silver-leaf finish. Nevertheless, it retained the name Ginkaku-ji, or the Silver Pavilion (Figure 11), even after the villa was converted into a Zen temple and was named Jisho-ji (Keane 36-40).



Figure 11



Figure 12

Some kilometers northwest of Kyoto in the river resort of Arashiyama stands a temple which bridges the past and the present as well as reflects direct connections between Chinese and Japanese garden design.

One of the oldest and finest remaining gardens of this genre in Japan, Tenryu-ji, was completed in 1265. Its remarkable rock arrangement in the pond suggests the Chinese isle of immortals, Paglai, and may well have been constructed by visiting Chinese craftsmen who had fled to Japan to escape the Mongols. Although the entire complex was set on fire several times during wars, the three examples of rock artistry (Figure 12), unmistakably in the Sung (960-1125) style, are the only surviving examples of that period (Stanley-Baker 122). In these gardens, although they are stroll gardens with ponds and other basic Chinese style compounds, the design creates a clear fore-ground, middle-ground, and back-ground. A contrast can thus be made with regard to space and size factors when comparing Tenryu-ji and a Chinese garden such as the Summer Palace. Less than one acre in size, Tenryu-ji contains a pond only fifty meters wide and seventy meters long; clearly its principal function is to create reflective images of the immediate surroundings. And the only way to observe this breathtaking scene is by still concentration rather than by roaming around. This is quite different from Summer Palace's huge Kunming Lake whose primary role is to provide both recreational boating and various views from the boat as it moves around. This motion creates different effects of the same scenery from different vantage points. The same can be said of the Long Corridor. Its role is to provide for the moving viewer the best possible condition for observing the surroundings.

Evidently, Zen Buddhism, with its strong association to art, had a great influence on both the design and the function of Japanese Gardens. As time went on, this philosophy became better understood and gave a deeper meaning to creative work in Japan. The Zen influences generated garden designs that gradually distanced themselves from their Chinese origin in Nature. They became places of contemplation for developing a higher plane of consciousness towards eventual and complete self-realization. The garden offers a look beyond superficial aspects of the surrounding world, and a glimpse at the truth that otherwise lies hidden within the human soul.

List of Illustrations

(all photographs by the author)

1. Illustration of an Egyptian garden circa 1000 BC.
- 2a. Pasargad, Shiraz Iran, 600 BC.
- 2b. Plan of Pasargad
3. A pictograph depicting the word yuan, found on a bronze seal, circa 1500 BC.
4. Plan of Summer Palace
5. Kunming Lake, Summer Palace, Beijing, China
6. Marble Boat, Summer Palace, Beijing, China
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9. Golden Pavilion, Kyoto, Japan
10. Cascade rockwork, Golden Pavilion (collage), Kyoto, Japan
11. Silver Pavilion, Kyoto, Japan
12. Tenryu-ji, Kyoto, Japan

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