

Gardens

TO THE TEACHER

OBJECTIVES OF THIS UNIT: : To introduce students to the Chinese garden as an art form. To help students understand the literati elite not just in terms of their connections to government service and Confucian learning, but also in relation to notions of elegance.

TEACHING STRATEGIES: This material is suitable to a comparative approach. Students can compare not only western gardens to Chinese gardens, but western luxury residences (palaces, country houses, mansions) to the gardens and homes built by Chinese with means and taste.

Another good approach to this unit is to link gardens to other key elements of Chinese civilization, such as aesthetic principles also found in landscape painting, ideas associated with Daoism concerning paradises and immortals, and the social life of the literati elite.

WHEN TO TEACH: In a chronologically-organized course, Gardens should not be taught before the Ming dynasty, when these sorts of gardens became an important part of the life of the elite, at least in the Jiangnan area. If both Homes and Gardens are used in the class, it would be better to do Homes first as it introduces concepts elaborated on in Gardens. This unit could also be used in a course on Chinese art.



Xie Huan, Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden (detail)

SOURCE: *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua 6: Mingdai huihua, shang* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 42, p. 49. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Xie Huan (Ming, active 1368-1437 AD), *An Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden*. This is the third section of a handscroll executed in ink and colors on silk. The painting depicts a gathering organized by Yang Rong, one of the Grand Secretaries under Ming Xuanzong. Yang Rong invited eight other high-ranking ministers to his garden to enjoy themselves composing poetry, viewing paintings, and playing chess.

Garden design was an art in China. One of the most common ways to make a Chinese home more elegant was to develop one or more compounds into a garden with plants, rocks, and garden buildings. Gardens were especially appreciated for their great beauty and naturalness. In time, garden design came to be regarded as a refined activity for the well-heeled and well-educated.

It may be useful to note that what we are calling a garden in China is somewhat different from its counterpart in western Europe or the United States. It is not an expanse of green with incidental buildings, but rather an area in which buildings surround arrangements of rocks, plants and water; without these buildings, the Chinese garden is not a garden. The architectural elements themselves are decorative and structure how one views the scenery. Good views are many and intimate in scale, in contrast with the sweeping vistas and mathematically ordered plantings of European gardens of the same period. The enclosure of the entire compound by walls or other natural barriers marks this area off as a special precinct for private enjoyment.

Gardens were an important part of the homes of the elite long before Ming times, but reached their fullest development in the late Ming in the Jiangnan area, which comprised the southeastern part of China south of the Yangtze River, including the densely-populated cultural centers of Yangzhou, Hangzhou, and Suzhou. These gardens served multiple purposes for their owners. They were extensions and developments of a family's



Origin



Design



Social Uses

property; they added cultural value by providing a pleasurable environment for private relaxation and entertaining friends and colleagues. In some cases they also contained a productive agricultural portion in the form of orchards or fields for cash crops that could support the needs of a large extended family. But most gardens were luxury items that demonstrated and enhanced the status of their owners.

As you look at the images in this section, keep in mind the following questions:

- How does the garden relate to the courtyard-style home in terms of structure and design?
- What differences between the house and garden made the garden a desirable addition to the elegant home?
- What types of activities or events were more likely to take place in the garden as opposed to the house, and why?
- How did the ways to make homes more elegant and impressive differ in China and Europe?

Suggested Reading



Aesthetics



Tour

Origins of Garden Design



Rubbing of tomb tile depicting the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (detail)

SOURCE: Zhang Anzhi, ed, *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 1: Yuanshi shehui zhi Nanbeichao huihua* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 98, p. 144.

Gardens can be traced back to ancient times in China, but always included the same basic elements. After the Han dynasty, Daoist ideals of disengaging from worldly concerns gave a rationale for gardens as environments in which an individual could escape the often harsh demands of a politically engaged civic life.

Gardens were originally simple retreats for contemplation set in nature. Early exponents of the ideal of retreat from public life, like the legendary Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove of the Six Dynasties period, merely sought their own retreat in a ready-made natural setting such as a wooded area or mountain stream. From the Han dynasty onward, some individuals built more elaborate precincts that were based on the models of the imperial grounds. One aristocrat lost his life for assuming for himself this royal privilege, flaunting his wealth with a collection of natural specimens similar to those previously found only in the emperor's Hunting Park.



Liu Songnian (ca. 1175-95), Lohan (detail)

SOURCE: *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 4: Liang Song huihua, xia* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 54, p. 79. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Daoist immortals were believed to inhabit remote mountain peaks and practice secret methods of elixir-making there. Portraits of other religious figures, like the Buddhist lohan at the left, were often situated in a landscape with magical qualities. The deer in this painting is a symbol of the Buddha because it is believed a deer was one of his early incarnations.

Certain plants and animals were favored for gardens because of their associations with overcoming the limits of ordinary life. Some trees or plants, for example, grew against harsh odds, such as difficult terrain, and certain animals, such as cranes, seemed to possess an ability to survive in ways beyond human capability.

What objects can you identify in this painting that might have carried such symbolic associations?

ANSWER: The monkey shown in the picture is a gibbon. It exists in treetops and never needs to touch ground and so has come to be associated with the wisdom of long life to which Daoists aspire, and the attainment of other-worldly knowledge towards which Buddhists work.

Peach trees blossom in the early spring amid the snow, and so peaches are associated with endurance and long life. Eating a peach from the mythical garden of the Queen Mother of the West was said to assure a life span of a thousand years.

Fengshui (or wind-and-water, or geomancy) also played a large role in the form a garden would take. The natural environment was interpreted by the *fengshui* master as a living organism, the alteration of which could positively or negatively affect the lives of people in contact with it for generations to come.

The lore of mountains and rocks, important in Chinese religion and art, was also an indispensable part of garden landscape design. Large rocks placed by themselves or groupings of smaller rocks served as analogies for mountains, which were considered sacred sites and potential resting places for immortals.

One of the most common implements found in tombs from the Han dynasty onward was the incense burner. Below is a typical example of this kind of object.



Censer from the Han dynasty tomb of Liu Sheng

Gongyi meishu bian 5 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1986), pl. 201, p. 172. Collection of the Hebei Cultural Artifacts Institute. Boshan censer of gold-inlaid bronze from the tomb of Liu Sheng (died 113 BC), Mancheng, Hebei (Western Han).

What features of a mountain would appeal to a Daoist?

Which features do you see here, and why might they be so exaggerated?

The emperor, as guardian of the realm, sought to demonstrate a harmonious relationship with and an intimate knowledge of the forces of nature. The imperial parks were vast in territory and kept an abundance of all imaginable plants and animals, almost like a museum. Such parks replicated the emperor's realm in miniature, with man-made lakes and mountains often corresponding to real geographical features. They reinforced the emperor's role as the Son of Heaven.

By the Tang dynasty, a tradition of painting the royal hunting parks as paradise landscapes had developed. This gradually came to be applied to representations of landscapes in general.

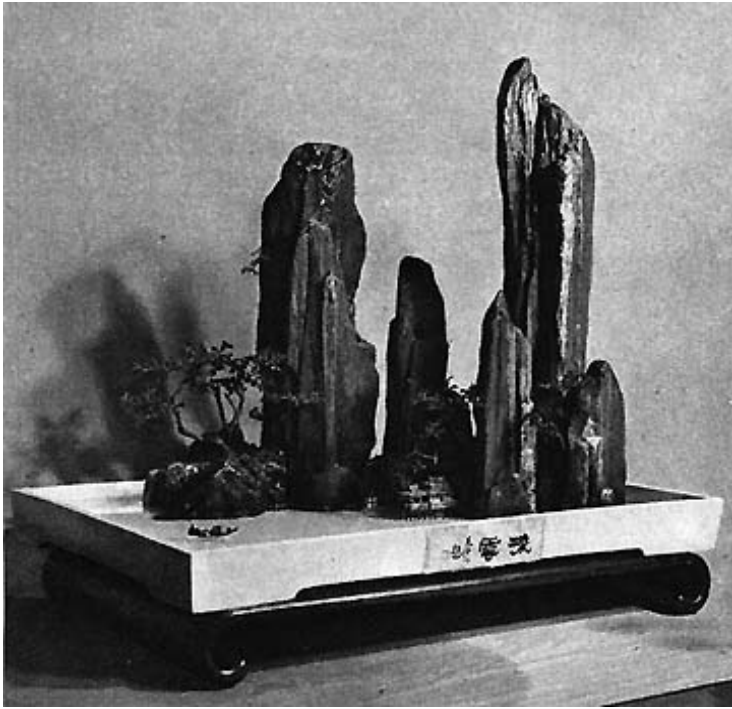
What might be the purpose of depicting such a dramatic contrast between size of people and mountains in the scene below?



Zhao Boju, *Autumn Colors on Rivers and Mountains*, detail

SOURCE: Bo Xinian, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 3: Liang Song huihua, shang* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988). *Autumn Colors on Rivers and Mountains* by Zhao Boju. Ink and colors on silk; section three of a handscroll.

Sometime during the Tang dynasty, miniature landscapes in trays (or *penjing*), composed of rocks, plants and water, began to take the place of the censers (see above). These small-scale landscapes still retained their otherworldly associations. Especially favored were highly contorted rock and plant specimens. Scholars often kept these dwarfed landscapes on their desks, and one Tang dynasty court magician was said to have cultivated the ability to disappear into his tray landscape at will. Collecting unusual rock and plant specimens became common literati pastimes from the Song Dynasty onward.



Tray landscape

SOURCE: Liu Dunzeng, *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianshe gongye chubanshe, 1979), pl. 6-106, p. 302.



"Lofty mountain" rock garden

SOURCE: *China Pictorial* 8.362 (1978): 44.

The selection of plants for the garden also carried meaning. Private garden builders at first followed the examples of the emperor in collecting exotic plant and animal life in a complete miniaturized version, or microcosm of the realm. In the Song Dynasty, however, many scholars took up garden planning as a cultivated pursuit, writing handbooks on growing a wide number of flower varieties and the collecting and appreciation of unique and valuable rock specimens. There were many private retreats in the estates of scholars in and around the larger cities of Kaifeng, Hangzhou, and Luoyang.

Garden construction reached a peak during the Ming and Qing dynasties, as landholding aristocratic and scholar elite families moved their main residences from the countryside to urban and suburban areas of southern cities. Suzhou in particular became a place of refined culture, renowned for its canals and mild climate, as well as the ready availability of garden building expertise.

Move on to [Garden Design](#)

Garden Design

The movement of wealthy families of elite status to the Jiangnan region, which began during the Song dynasty and continued into the Ming, had an impact on the popularity of private gardens. Jiangnan was an area where things grew easily, aided by mild winters with plenty of rainfall. As these wealthy families shifted to urban areas, they established urban estates as their primary residences. Members of the literati and merchant classes who had the means and ambition to do so created intimate urban gardens within their household compounds as microcosmic replicas of nature. The gardens of Yangzhou and Suzhou in particular became famous. Tradesmen in turn responded to the demand, and these cities became centers for garden design, construction, and the distribution of the basic materials required to build a garden, such as flowering plants and shrubs and garden rocks.

Building a garden gave a person the opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge and cultivated taste. Even the most experienced and talented carpenter was not presumed to understand the philosophical principles needed to create a coherent design.



The designer, ideally the patron himself, had to master such diverse fields as siting (*fengshui*), architecture, water management, botany, and landscape design, as well as be familiar with the poetic and painted gardens and parks of the past.

Move on to information about *fengshui* if you have not already viewed it. [In the teachers' guide, in the Homes unit]

Twentieth century tile setters laying a garden path

SOURCE: Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, translated by Alison Hardie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pl. 93, p. 100. Photograph of artisans laying paving tiles, Jiading, 1985 (Zhong Ming, photographer).

The four principle elements of a Chinese garden are:



Rocks



Water



Buildings



Plants

Click on an image above to learn how that particular element was used in gardens.

Rocks and Mountains

Rocks were to the Chinese garden what sculpture was to its European counterpart. A deep appreciation for rocks stemmed from ancient religious attitudes toward nature, which included the veneration of mountains. Rocks were believed to have a concentrated amount of natural energy and symbolized the dwelling places of the Daoist immortals. A region with rugged, lofty and remote terrain was believed to produce especially potent minerals and plants that, when consumed in just the right combination, would guarantee longevity if not immortality itself. Rocks were introduced into the garden as individual specimens and as components of complex rockeries.

As an element, rock is classified by the Chinese as "*yang*" because it is strong, durable, hard and "male"), but the best garden stones also exhibited spareness and delicacy. Top-heavy, rugged stones that seemed to defy gravity and to hang in the air like clouds were the most highly prized.



If a rock appeared porous with many holes penetrating all the way through and had a strangely contorted overall form, it was considered a highly valuable asset to the garden. Lake Tai near Suzhou produced the most prized rocks; the chemical composition of the Great Lake caused the limestone on its bed to erode in an irregular fashion.

Why might a garden designer isolate an individual rock like the one at left in its own pavilion?

Lake Tai rock in three-sided pavilion at the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.

Rocks were placed not only in gardens, but also were treated as art objects, to be put on display inside, perhaps on a scholar's desk. Certain types of rocks, such as the Lingbi rock, shown to the right, were highly appreciated for their luster, unusual shapes, interesting veining, or the cavities that formed within them. Often these rocks were highly polished and placed on custom-made stands.

Why would holes have given stones greater value?

HINT: The holes in Lake Tai rocks are evidence of the erosive action of a yin element, water, on a yang element, stone. The convoluted and perforated forms are suggestive of mountain grottoes believed abundant in natural energy (qi) and the favorite haunts of immortals.



Lingbi rock

SOURCE: Robert D. Mowry, *Worlds Within Worlds: The Richard Rosenblum Collection of Chinese Scholars' Rocks* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1997), plate 6, p. 163. Black Lingbi limestone, Kangxi period (1662-1722). Richard Rosenblum Collection.



Rocks were also arranged to form the edges of man-made streams and ponds, with great care taken to make small details like this stream appear as they might in nature.

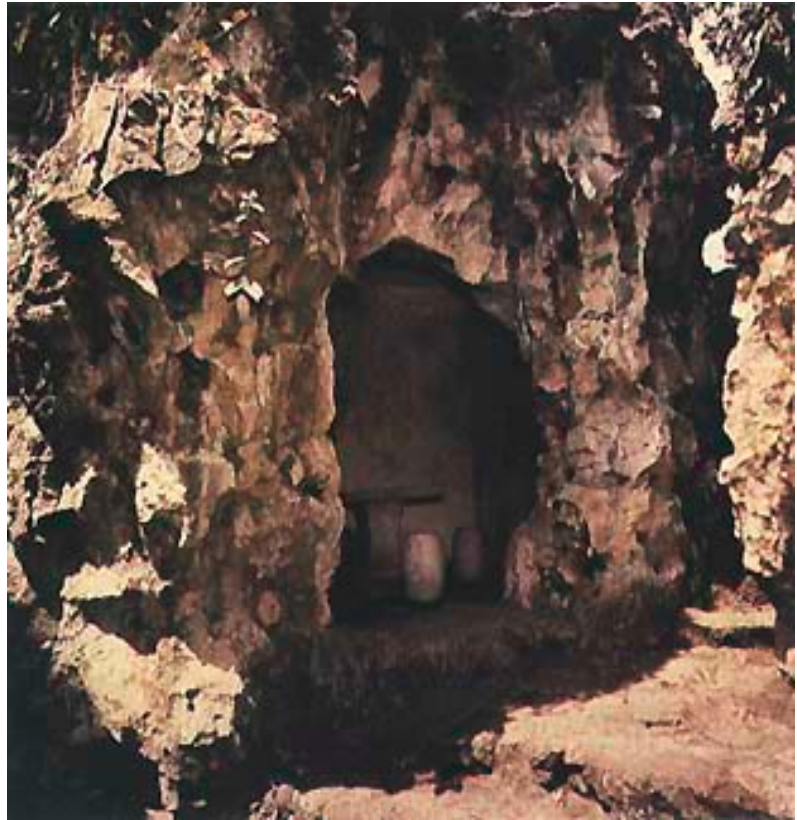
What is naturalistic about the rocks shown in the garden settings on this page? What seems artificial?

Artificial Stream bed, Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou (Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou. Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1980.

Grottoes and caves were believed to share in common with the eroded stones from Lake Tai a heightened source of cosmic energy or *qi*, due to being formed by the concentrated action of water upon stone deep within the earth .

Why would a cave or rock-cut chamber be considered an ideal place to rest?



Rock chamber at Mountain Dwelling of Encircling Excellence

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 118.



This grotto-like entrance leads to the second floor of the library at the Garden of the Master of Nets. It appears large enough to enter, but becomes quite confining after only a few steps.

Why would an entrance like this be used in a garden setting?

Why do you think the entrance to a library was given this kind of external form?

Entrance to second floor of the library,

Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou

**SOURCE: Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou.
Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.**

One of the most characteristic and outstanding features of the Chinese garden is the artificial mountain built of individual stones, which were cemented together to form complex structures.

These were often placed carefully in the garden compound as focal points of a larger view, or as ideal vantage points themselves.



Why do you think the artificial mountain shown at left was constructed at this particular location?

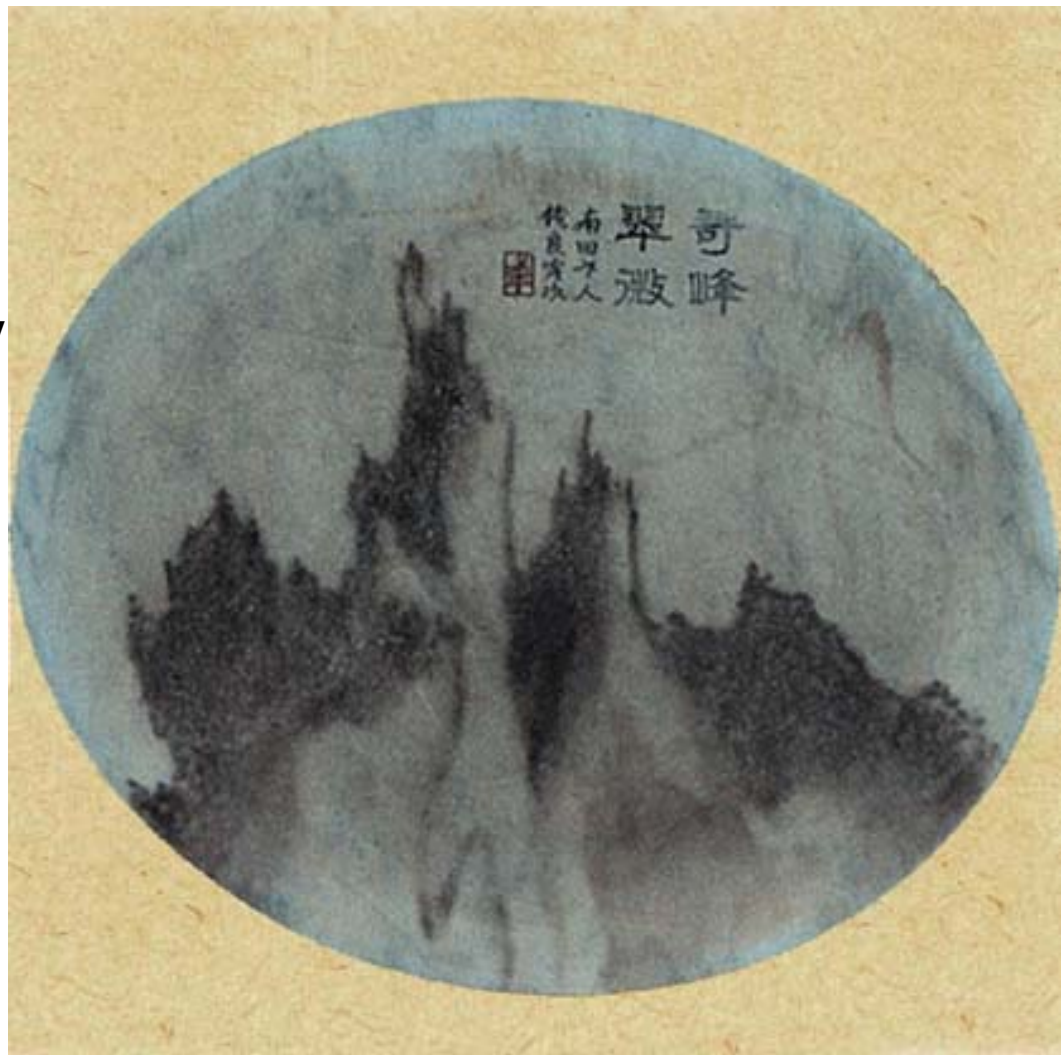
HINT: The name of the hall, Barrier of Clouds, refers to this rock wall. From across the pond, the wall is reminiscent of a mountain retreat popular among Daoists. The suggestion is reinforced by the glimpse of a roof beyond the rock barrier, where a scholar could escape.

Artificial mountain in front of Barrier of Clouds Hall, Garden of the Master of Nets

SOURCE: Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou. Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

Certain types of stones were collected for the melodious sounds they made when struck.

Others, like the one at right, were recognized as "found" art works, completed by nature itself. They are typically displayed within one of a garden's many halls or studies.



Marble slab with naturally occurring landscape, Garden of the Artless Official, Suzhou

SOURCE: Garden of the Artless Official, Suzhou. Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

Move on to [Water](#)

Water

Water is a central component of the Chinese garden. When planning a garden, the first step was to investigate the source and flow of water available at the site. Builders of urban gardens usually began by dredging streams and digging out ponds, because sites were far removed from the natural environment. The excavated earth would then be used to build hills and mountains that gave the garden its particular character.

Water was believed to serve as a balance for other elements in nature and in the garden. As a visitor walks through a garden, water reflections and contours interact with other components. Bodies of water could catch the eye by glinting in the sunlight, or establish a particular mood reflecting a gray sky.



In the garden to the left, try to identify elements that complement each other, such as light and dark, solid and fluid, or natural and man-made.

What other features of pools or streams do you think a garden designer would exploit?

What effect does the water have on your view across it?

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhonggou yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 56, p. 75.

The water in a city garden is typically broken into small, separate areas that are sometimes connected with ponds or flowing water. Pools are made to wander, disappear, then reappear at the next corner.

The sites generally considered to be the best in the garden are those at the edges of lakes with a view of mountains or hills beyond.

Semi-circular bridges, as seen below, are often chosen because they "complete themselves" as they are reflected in the water; they are also a symbolic reference to the moon. One expression equates watching the moon (as reflected in water) with "washing the soul."

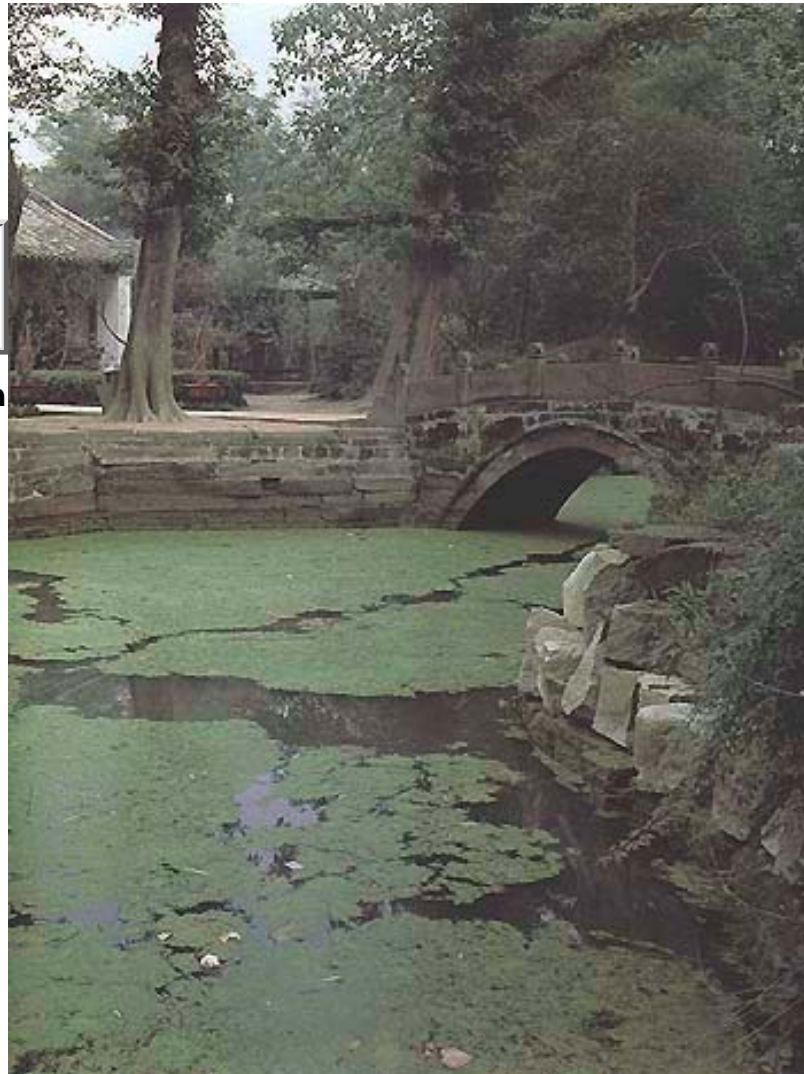
As you can see in the garden on the right, water quality not always clean and brilliant - often the ponds are rather murky and opaque.

Why would such "thick" water be attractive to the viewer?

HINT: Think of the difference between surface quality in clear, moving, or "thick" bodies of water.

When water is thick with algae it is imbued with a sign of life.

Coolness is also implied by water, not only through its own properties, but also through sounds, like that of rain or breezes moving over rustling lotus leaves. Trickling water offers its own distinct qualities of movement and sound.



SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 190, p. 219.

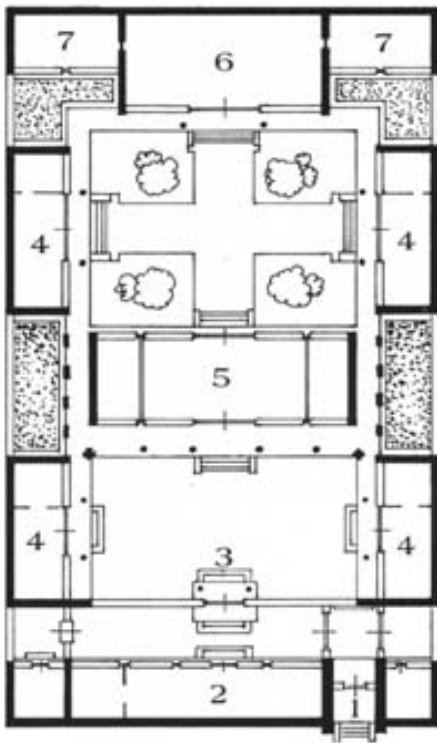
Move on to [Buildings](#)

Buildings

Despite the fact that many buildings in gardens could actually serve as residences year round, most garden architecture is fanciful and decorative. The overall arrangement of buildings divides the interior space of the garden into smaller cells that contain one or many small scenic views.

Compare these ground plans of the courtyard house and a garden. *What features of basic layout do they share in common? How are they different?*

[Click here for a review of the layout of a courtyard-style home](#) [found in the Interiors section of Homes]



Plan of a double courtyard house

SOURCE: Yan Chongnian, *Beijing, The Treasures of An Ancient Capital* (Beijing: Morning Glory Press: 1987), p. 247.



Plan of the Blue Waves Pavilion (Suzhou, Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen, *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979), IV-3, pl 389.

Buildings in a garden are often connected by covered walkways and different spaces are visually linked by views glimpsed through open doorways, lattice windows, and decorative openings in walls. At other times, the view is purposely obstructed by building placement and other "natural" barriers such as artificial mountain structures. A garden's planner would also consider how a particular view might change as a visitor walked.



Lattice window, Garden For Lingering, Suzhou (Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 80, p. 102.



Moon Gate, Garden for Close Examination, Nanjing

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 60, pp. 78-9.



Chinese garden designers use "borrowed views," picturesque views that are framed by parts of the buildings themselves but exist beyond the walls of the garden proper.

Sometimes views are borrowed from other parts of the garden. "Leak windows" are openings decorated with lattice designs that allow the viewer glimpses into smaller courtyards and spaces that the building would otherwise hide.

What difference can you perceive in how you would experience this type of garden compared with the garden of a French villa or an English country garden?

Doorway looking in from a passage in the northwest courtyard of the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou (Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 84, p. 107.

Here are examples of some of the buildings you would find in a garden. As you look at them, keep in mind the following questions:

- How is the architecture of the garden related to that of typical living quarters?
- Can you tell by the design of a building within the garden what its function is?
- Can you identify natural metaphors in building designs?
- How do the buildings relate to the natural surroundings?
- What do you think is the reason that architecture plays an important role in the Chinese garden?

What might the advantages be in having a building without walls?

Where would you expect to find this building type in a garden?

SOME THOUGHTS: This pavilion-type of structure would usually be placed on ground that provides a high vantage point, and would also serve as a resting place. A garden designer would think about what views might best suit this particular site.



Treebark Pavilion, Mt. Qingcheng, Sichuan province

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianshu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianshu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianshu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 181.



This type of building usually contained the owner's library.

What features of this building can you see that would make it ideal for use as a library?

ANSWER: A two-story building would offer the scholar views of his garden, plenty of light, and a potentially dry storage area for his manuscripts.

Two-storied "Boat" hall, The Garden of Pure Radiance, Suzhou

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 117, p. 145.

What might you notice walking along a crooked walkway that you might not notice on a straight one



Covered walkway, Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou (Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 107.

Move on to [Plants](#)

Plants

Chinese garden designers followed a fairly traditional approach in the choice of plant materials. They selected and cultivated long-standing favorites that carried symbolic meaning in poetry and literature, like the pine, cypress, plum and bamboo, as well as flowering plants like the peony, orchid, and chrysanthemum.

Some of these plants were associated with famous historical figures, while others were especially cultivated in certain areas. The peony, for example, was linked closely to Loyang because it was cultivated there with great skill.





Chen Hongshou (1599-1652), leaf from an album of miscellaneous paintings

SOURCE: *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 8: Mingdai huihua, xia* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 170, p. 191.

Between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, a wide array of botanical items was introduced into western Europe from China. As these new materials became available and design ideas borrowed from China gained greater acceptance, European gardens of the period acquired a new vitality and emphasis on exotic naturalism. Despite the great variety of plant life available at home throughout China, the garden patron still relied heavily on traditional plant selections to create a symbolic environment.

As you look at the examples below of plantings in Chinese gardens, think about the following questions:

- What symbolic botanical references would a well-educated man be expected to understand and communicate in creating a garden?
- Were garden patrons conservative or consistent in their choice of plant materials? Why?
- How do the plants fit into the overall design? Is the shape of a plant's leaves, for example, an important factor in where it is placed?

Many of the plants selected for display in the garden had a rich history of literary associations. In ancient works like *The Book of Odes*, it is evident that plant symbolism was already well developed in the Zhou dynasty. For example, because pines were tough and rugged, they were considered symbols of the virtuous scholar who weathered the political ups and downs of official life; the cypress, twisted and withered, was a symbol of longevity. Bamboo was considered the emblem of the perfect Confucian gentleman, who kept his virtue pure and his emotions in check; like a bamboo stalk, he kept his inner self empty and untroubled, and could bend in the wind without breaking.



Chen Hongshou (1599-1652), Drinking Wine in the Garden

SOURCE: Yang Han, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 8: Mingdai huihua, xia* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 160, p. 179.

Often the visual effects of plant materials were more important than the plants themselves: they created dappled lighting effects on otherwise plain walls, and when placed in conjunction with water features helped to visually expand the space of the otherwise cramped urban garden.

The plantain, shown at left, has large leaves like that of a banana tree. It was associated with poor scholars, since the leaves were wide enough to write on when paper or silk was scarce. It was also valued for the somewhat melancholic sound raindrops made when hitting its broad leaves.

In paintings of gardens such as the one on the left, most features included would have some significance, especially plants.

What significance might the plantain hanging over the scholar suggest in the painting on the left?

What signs of a literati class do you see?

ANSWER: There are several bronze vessels, signs of a scholar's wealth and his appreciation for antiquity. The large plantains would refer to calligraphy, which may be what the scholar is doing. You can also find large and small intricately shaped rocks valued by the literati class.

In the examples below, do the plants seem like a dominant element in how the scenery is put together, or are they minor accents to the rocks and architecture? Why?



Why do you think the ground surface is paved?

HINT: Besides keeping down weeds, paving makes it possible to introduce a wide range of patterns, suggesting the rippling of water or other effects. Grass and lawns never became popular, as they have in the European tradition.

[Click here for more examples of paving patterns.](#)

Courtyard from the Garden of the Artless Official, Suzhou (Jiangsu province)

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 86.

Look at the four examples of outdoor paving tiles. *What could be the advantages and disadvantages of having a tiled ground surface instead of grass?*

How do you think the tiling designs might have been chosen?



SOURCE: Garden for Lingering, Suzhou. Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld (undated). Tile pattern in colored pebbles.



SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen, *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979), p. Plum blossom tiling pattern.



SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen, ed., *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979), p. . Cracked ice tiling, Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou.



SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 90, p. 111. Terracing, balustrade, grass and rocks in the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou.

Do you think passageways and courtyards like the one at right were meant to be viewed from one position?

How would your perception of such a courtyard change if you were standing on the other side of the wall looking in?



Wall in the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld .



Seasonal arrangements of brightly colored flowering plants often highlight an area that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Seasonal plantings amid rockery at the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou

SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), pl. 89, p. 111.

Many windows seem to be composed with a particular view in mind. This one below is backed by a wall, forcing a close-up view and encouraging the use of plants and rock of small size.

What type of gardening would this scene require?

How does the bamboo complement the rock in this scene?



View onto small rock and bamboo landscape from a "leak window" at the Garden of the Artless Official, Suzhou

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

Move on to the [Garden as a Site of Social Activity](#)

The Garden as a Site of Social Activity

As pleasant retreats that were easily accessible, gardens were favorite locations for social gatherings of many kinds. One could entertain distinguished guests, throw elaborate or intimate parties, or relax in private with family members.



Woodblock illustration, "Lovers' Conversation" (Ming dynasty)

SOURCE: Wang Bomin, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 20: Ban hua* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 75, p. 80. Woodblock illustration of Cai Bi, "Lovers' conversation". Ming dynasty, Tianbao reign period.

The gardens of more elegant homes afforded the residents greater total living space and flexibility in entertaining guests. The garden served as an extension of the house proper in summer, and often the architecture built within the garden portion of the family compound included habitable living quarters. These rooms could prove to be more comfortable during the hot summer months, being ideally positioned to take advantage of breezes off the central pond and surrounded by plantings of aromatic flowers and herbs. Some of the wealthier families could extend their hospitality to friends or colleagues in need of temporary lodging, and the guest, especially if he were a painter or poet, might even spend a productive year or two as an extended member of the household, providing the host with paintings, calligraphy, or serving in some literary capacity in lieu of his expenses.

Because it remained within the walls of the family estate, the garden was also considered an acceptable location for the women of the household to relax, enjoy a pleasant and safe natural setting, and socialize among themselves and with visitors.



Illustration of *The Golden Bell*, by Wu Sanghe (Ming dynasty)

SOURCE: Wang Bomin, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 20 : Banhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 75, p. 80.

What mood do you think the image above is intended to convey?

There is a bird in the top left of the image at which the women are gazing. From the picture's mood and the direction of the women's attention, can you suggest what the scene might illustrate?



Many popular stories and novels of the Ming contain family dramas that take place within garden walls. In *The Story of the Stone* (also known as *Dream of the Red Chamber*) by Cao Xueqin, for example, most of the young hero's trials and tribulations occur in the gardens of the family estate.

The depiction of men and women together in Chinese art is not a very common subject. Woodblock prints from the Ming such as the one on the right, however, frequently illustrate men and women in what seems to be an acceptable locale for them to meet.

What do you think the relationship is between the individuals depicted here?

HINT: This is a courtship scene. The two women are different sizes because according to representational coding, servants always appear smaller.

Illustration from a collection of *zaju* plays by Yuan writers (Ming dynasty, Wanli reign period)

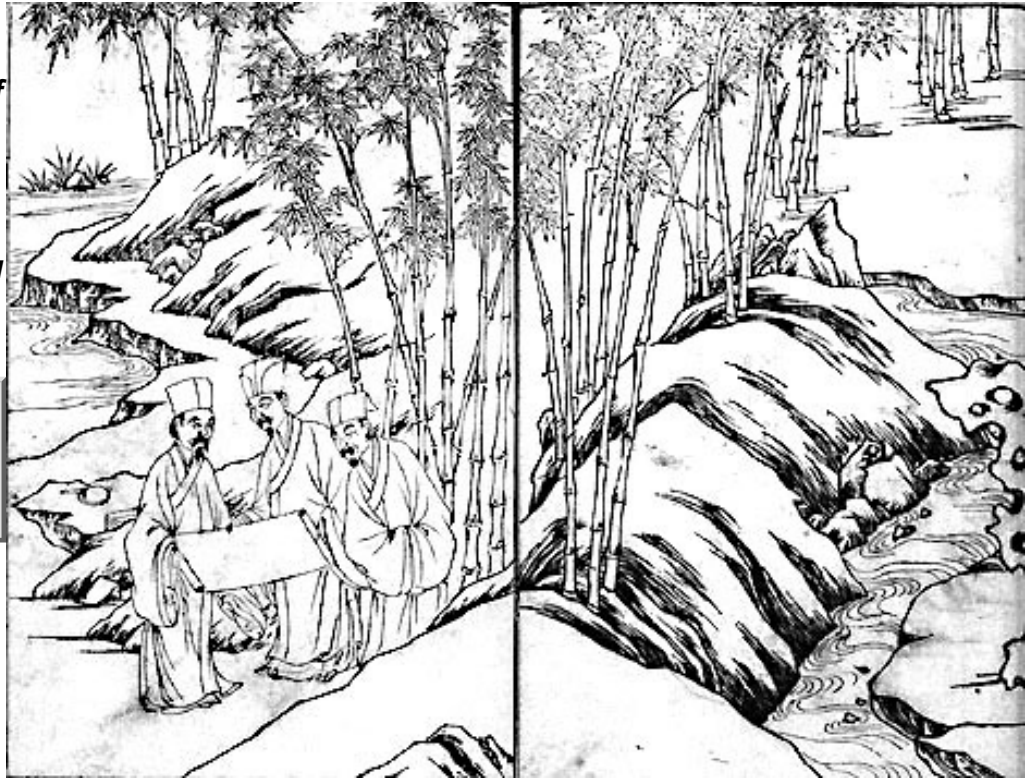
SOURCE: Wang Bomin, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 20: Banhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 93, p. 98.

Gardens were often constructed by members of the scholar class with the intention that they would provide a hospitable location for gatherings devoted to cultivated pursuits like painting, calligraphy, and playing the zither, as well as for discussing important topics of the day.

What features do you think a scholar would seek to establish in a garden to distinguish himself as a person of taste and learning?

What might the scholar-officials at right be doing, and why do you think are they doing it as this location?

ANSWER: The scholars are either reading or writing. Because of its natural setting, a garden would encourage the self-expression and spontaneity associated with writing or reciting.



Woodblock print, Poetry illustration of venerable scholars (Ming)

SOURCE: Wang Bomin, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 20: Ban hua* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 68, p. 72.

This image illustrates a different type of gathering in a garden.



What appears to be the focus of this event?

Can you tell what the occupations or social classes of the participants in this gathering are?

ANSWER: This gathering includes scholars, monks and a Buddhist icon.

Chen Hongshou (1599-1652 AD), An Elegant Gathering

SOURCE: Yang Han, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 8: Mingdai huihua, xia* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988). pl.166, p. 187. detail. Collection of the Shanghai Provincial Museum.

Chinese scholars have often characterized art activities as means to purify their thoughts and quiet their emotions. These pursuits were considered essential for counterbalancing the chaotic realms of social responsibility and political career.

What kinds of "lofty" pursuits can you identify in the garden scene below?



Li Shida, *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden*

SOURCE: Yang Han, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 8 - Mingdai huihua* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 65, p. 70.

ANSWER: If you look closely, you can see individuals writing on the large stone's surface and on paper at a table, weaving silk, playing a musical instrument, and possibly reciting poetry.

Since the time of the renowned Six Dynasties calligrapher Wang Xizhi, wine drinking has been viewed as an incentive or encouragement to creativity in the arts. Poetry gatherings were often modeled on Wang Xizhi's famous Orchid Pavilion outing, in which guests were penalized with a cup of wine for not being able to compose an impromptu poem. Literary quality was determined not only by skill with rhymes and diverse subject matter, but also with innovation and spontaneity.

In the scene below, what clues might suggest whether the men are in a garden or not?

HINT: Notice the objects used in this gathering; they would be unlikely to be transported to any great distance.



Wan Bangzhi, *Drinking*. Detail of a handscroll

SOURCE: Yang Han, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 6: Mingdai huihua, shang* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 169 , p. 206.

Move on to [Aesthetics of the Garden](#)

Aesthetics of the Garden



Wang Tingyun (1151-1202 AD), *Secluded Bamboo and Withered Tree*

SOURCE: *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian3: Liang Song huihua, shang* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), p. 157, p. 158. Collection of Fujii Yurinkan, Kyoto. Section of handscroll, 15''h.

Designing a garden was seen as an intellectual pursuit, and often took a lifetime to perfect. The garden was an unfinished work constantly under revision and improvement. In its aesthetic goals and the symbolism employed, it was closely linked to activities such as Chinese painting.

To an individual of cultivated tastes, the scholars' gardens of the Ming represented a culmination of many values expressed in other art forms like painting, calligraphy, and poetry. Landscape painting in particular was very influential on garden design.

The aesthetic goals of a Chinese garden were not the same as those in typical Western gardens. Compare below two views of the same garden, the Garden of the Artless Official, located in Suzhou, Jiangsu province.

What seem to be the dominant elements or most distinctive features?

Are these different from parks or gardens with which you are more familiar?



A corner of the Garden of the Artless Official

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld.



Bird's eye view of Garden of the Artless Official

SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen. *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979).

An overall impression of tidiness and precision rarely strikes the visitor to a Chinese garden. Unlike its Japanese counterpart, the Chinese garden is enjoyed for its apparent disorder. Most gardens try to incorporate aspects of rusticity and spontaneity inherent in nature. This is a similar goal to that found in many Chinese paintings where subjects, such as gnarled trees or rigid bamboo (see the painting at the top of this page), are often chosen for their character.



Treebark pavilion, Chongqing (Sichuan province)

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianshu yishu 3: Yuanlin jianshu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianshu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 181. Rustic pavilion, Green Wall Mountain Pavilion, Guan county, Sichuan province.

What positive value do you think disorder might play in a Chinese garden?



Moon gate, Garden of the Artless Official, Suzhou

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), pl. 88, p. 90.

The personality of the garden's designer determined to a large extent the types of buildings, plants, and other features that were selected. The exterior environment might also influence how rustic or elegant a garden was in its architecture and decorative details.

Compare the Treebark pavilion (above) with the view through this gate in a city garden.

How do they each take advantage of the natural surroundings?

HINT: Consider the ways views are framed by these different architectural structures.

Another preference in garden design is to use shapes that metaphorically refer to elements in nature; some of the subtlest examples of this practice are also the most highly appreciated. The wall opening, above, is one example of an allusion to nature.

What might be some reasons for undulating walkways or walls in a garden like the one on the right?

ANSWER: Like pavilions, crooked pathways are intended to make a visitor slow down to better appreciate views. In terms of *fengshui*, undulating paths prevent bad spirits, who can only travel in straight lines, from progressing forward.



Wall and bamboo at the Shrine of Count Wu (Zhuge Liang), Chengdu (Sichuan province)

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 176.



**Covered walkway at the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou
(Jiangsu province)**

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu bian 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), p. 107.

Special thought was given to planning the Chinese garden for year-round enjoyment. It was thought that the garden should have a distinct look in each different season of the year.

How do you think the planners incorporated this preference into their final design of this garden?



Rejoicing in the West Tower, Chongqing (Sichuan province)

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Jianzhu yishu 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), pl. 88, p. 90. Autumn scenery viewed from Rejoicing in the West Tower, Chongqing (Sichuan province).

Move on to [Garden of the Master of Nets](#)

Garden of the Master of Nets

In Suzhou there are some twenty old gardens still in existence. The best way to get a feel for the Chinese scholar's garden is to experience it firsthand. The following is a walk-through tour of the Garden of the Master of Nets in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, one of the smallest (at little more than one acre) yet considered one of the best designed and most elegant of the private gardens still extant.

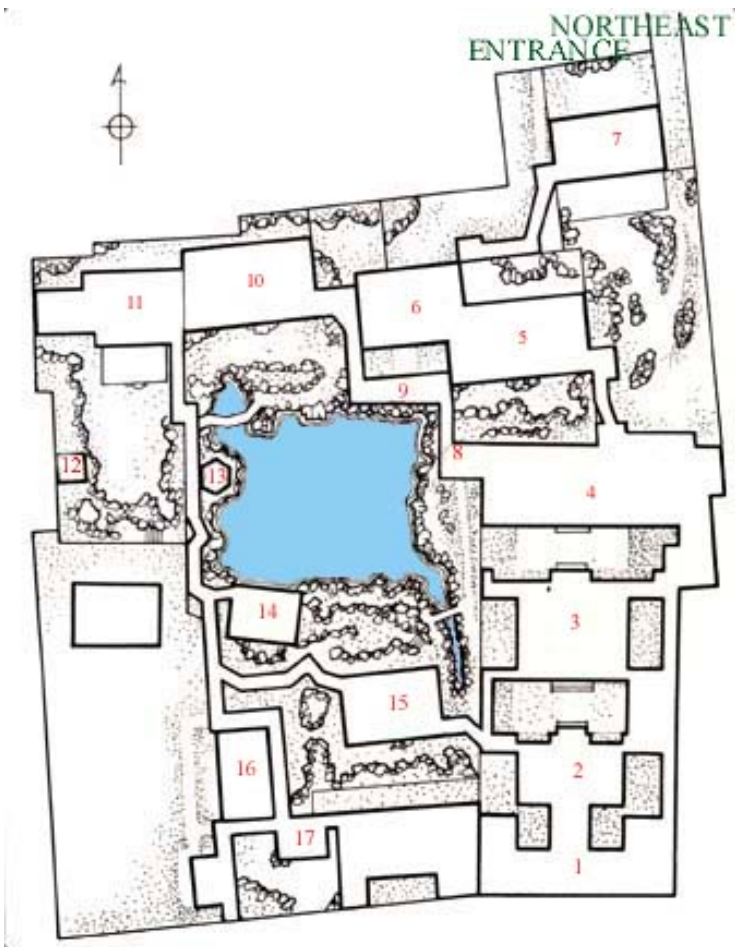
The entrance is here:



View of the rear entrance to the Garden of the Master of Nets

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.

The Master of Nets garden is situated in the southern part of Suzhou, within the city proper, a site that has been a garden since the middle of the twelfth century. First, let's orient ourselves as we enter the garden walls at the northeast corner of the compound. . .



Buildings within the garden

1. Main Gate
2. Sedan Chair Hall
3. Great Hall
4. Tower of Gathered Excellence
5. Five Summits Reading Hut
6. Chapel of Accumulated Emptiness
7. Clustered Cassia Hill Viewing Porch
8. Shooting at Ducks Walkway
9. A Branch Beyond Bamboo Viewing Porch
10. Viewing Porch for Looking at Pines and Studying Paintings
11. Gallery of Royal Spring
12. Cool Springs Pavilion
13. Pavilion Where the Moon Meets the Wind
14. Belvedere of Magnificent and Bright Waters
15. Barrier of Clouds Terrace
16. Pursuing Tranquility Lodging
17. Zither Chamber

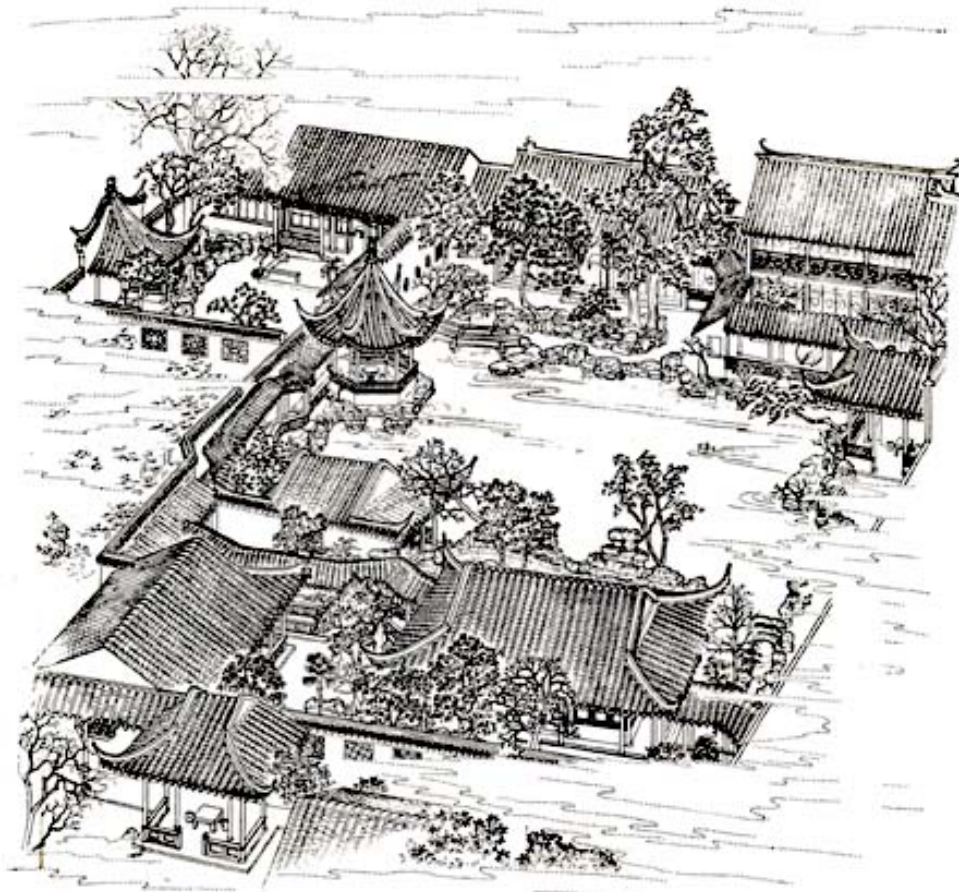
SOURCE: Qiao Yun, ed., *Zhongguo yuanlin yishu* (Hong Kong: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1982), p. 106.

What do you think inspired the names of the buildings in this garden?

ANSWER: The names of buildings in this garden have their precedent in palace architecture, where buildings were given names relating to auspicious sites or scenes.

For a birds' eye view of the Garden of the Master of Nets, click here.

Bird's eye view of the Garden of the Master of Nets, Suzhou



SOURCE: *Liu Dunzhen, Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979).

The name of the Garden of the Master of Nets refers to one of the features below; can you guess which it might be?



SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen, ed., *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979).



SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld.

ANSWER: The window on the upper right inspired the name of the garden. Its lattice design is based on the interlaced pattern of a fish net.

SOURCE: Liu Dunzhen, *Suzhou gudian yuanlin* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1979), plate 5-163. View from the Looking at Pines and Studying Paintings Gallery.



Now, let's start our tour.



We'll start out by walking from the northeast entrance through a set of courtyards, to end up in the Branch Beyond Bamboo Viewing Porch (number 9 on our main map), just south of the library. From there we can look through a moon gate onto the central pond.

Moon Gate, looking out through A Branch Beyond Bamboo viewing porch

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.

Go a few steps further to catch a glimpse of the Barrier of Clouds Terrace.

Do you think this is considered a good view of the building? Why are the rocks placed there?



Exterior view, Barrier of Clouds Hall

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

ANSWER: The rock wall serves as a screen, lending the barrier of clouds terrace increased privacy. The view from across the lake is intended to give the viewer a sensation of gazing on a retreat located high in the mountains, as a rock wall metaphorically stands for a bank of clouds or layer of mist, above which only a rooftop is visible.



Three-step bridge from the southeast corner of the pond

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.

If we leave the covered walkway and cross the small bridge in front of us, we can turn and face the opposite corner of the small lake, where we see another bridge.

But before we cross the garden to the other side of the pond, there is a small courtyard on the west side of the bridge . . .



At the lower end of the courtyard, a small pavilion (number **12** on the main map) sits up against the outer wall of the garden.

Does this seem different from other pavilions you've seen?

Does it look like you could walk through this structure?

Half-pavilion with Lake Tai rock

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.

If we follow the long covered walkway that borders the west side of the pond to the south, we pass the Belvedere of Magnificent and Bright Waters (number **14**). Just past this point, a crooked walkway veers off to the left; let's follow it towards the south end of the pond. . .

From the back of this viewing porch (number **15**) we can look out through "cracked ice" patterned windows to the northwest, with a view of rockery and bamboo (pictured below on the left).

Step just outside the building on the south side to look at another courtyard (pictured below on the right).

What types of activity do you think might have taken place in this particular courtyard?



View from the interior, Barrier of Clouds Hall

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.



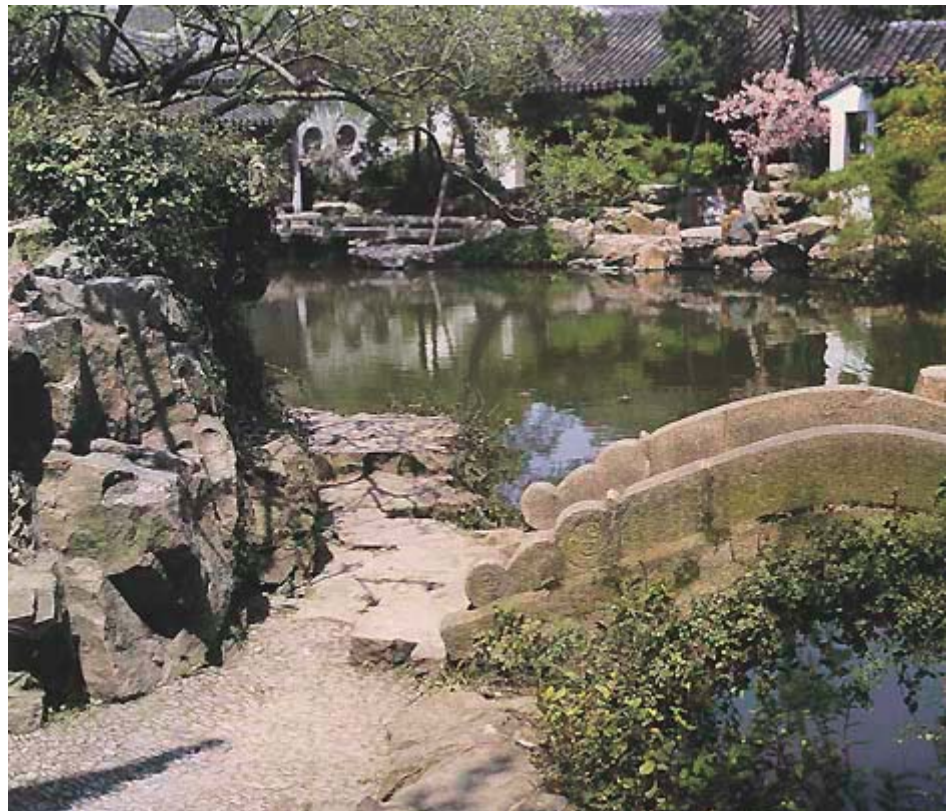
Courtyard south of Barrier of Clouds Hall

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1980.

Go back through the building, and follow the walkway that turns to the right, then take the walkway that splits off on a sharp left. These walkways connect portions of the compound (numbers 1, 2, and 3 on the main map) that were originally the living quarters of the occupants.

If we enter the courtyard to the west of the Great Hall (number 3), we find ourselves right next to the small bridge that we saw from the north side of the pond when we first started out.

How do you think the available pathways and views of various parts of the garden affect the visitor's impression of the overall distance and size of the compound?



Bridge looking across to the Gazing at Pines and Studying Paintings Studio

SOURCE: Pan Guxi, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji - Jianzhu yishu 3: Yuanlin jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1988), pl. 111.

Looking back past the bridge, the pond quickly dwindles to the size of a small brook.

What do you think is the function of the small sluice gate on the right below?



Pond "source"

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1980.



Sluice gate at pond "source"

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

ANSWER: The sluice gate may well not be functional. The garden is designed to look natural or "real," not necessarily functional.

Continue north along the pathway beside the pond. Just to the other side of the Tower of Gathered Excellence (number 4 on the main map) is a courtyard we haven't yet seen. This courtyard lies to the east of the Five Summits Reading Hut (number 5), which houses the owner's library on the second floor.

If we stand in the middle of the courtyard facing north, a small path veers off to the

right behind a rockery.



Northeast corner of library courtyard with black wall

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1982.

Return to the middle of the courtyard. Face the building directly to the west. *Where do you think this entrance leads?*

(You may remember this view from the discussion on Rocks in the Garden).

ANSWER: It is the entrance to second floor of library through Lake Tai rockery "cave."



SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1983.



Library courtyard with moon gate

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1981.

If we walk towards the southeast corner of the courtyard between two small rockeries, we see a wall which bounds the eastern edge of the garden compound; the wall has a moon-shaped gate in it (about a third of the way up from the bottom corner on the map).

Walk over to the southwest corner of the courtyard and look back at the moon gate. The tree that is framed within the circular gate is a cassia tree.



Library courtyard with moon gate and cassia tree

SOURCE: Photograph courtesy of Jerome Silbergeld, 1982.

The moon and the cassia tree are closely linked in Chinese mythology. It is said that if you look closely at the moon's surface, you can see the woodcutter Wu Kang cutting down a cassia tree. Wu Kang was banished to the moon for his fixation on the magical aspects of immortality. The gods would allow him to return to earth only after chopping down the huge cassia tree that thrived alone on the moon. However, the tree has magical self-restorative properties, and so Wu Kang continues to chop for eternity.

Why would a cassia tree and a moon be appropriate in a garden?

Although we have now walked the circuit of the Master of Nets compound, and are back at the Northeast entrance, there are many features of the garden that we haven't had time to see.

What features of this garden do you think might be typical of scholars' gardens in general?

What do you think might be a main source of appeal of this garden?

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