

HAMILTON GARDENS

THE CHINESE SCHOLAR'S GARDEN

The Chinese Scholar's Garden was the first of the Paradise Garden Collection, which is to include the six principal, historic, small garden traditions. It is generally but not exactly a traditional Chinese garden from the Sung Dynasty, 10th – 12th Century. (Sung gardens were not totally dominated by rocks, like the later Ming and Qing dynasties).

Design Concept

The art of Chinese gardening is one of the oldest artistic expressions in existence with a heritage that stretches back to the Han Period, at least 2,000 years ago. Because Chinese gardening has been a very influential art form it is sometimes called the 'mother of gardens'. Gardens of the Han Period were designed in close relationship to the contemporary arts of Chinese landscape painting, poetry, calligraphy and music (often written in or about the gardens and the landscapes that they evoke). Notable people (from Wuxi and Taiwan) have designed the examples of calligraphy in the Chinese Scholar's Garden to give this garden prestige. Eventually more calligraphy giving quotes, mottoes, and poetic verse may be added to the garden.

Scholars' gardens represented an imaginative world of allegory, fantasy, mystery and surprise and were rich in evocative symbolism, ambiguity and thought provoking artifice. While these are elements found in some other ancient gardens and architecture, generally they are unfamiliar to modern western gardeners who focus on the functions of a garden and on plant collections. Hence we often find them difficult to understand and to value.

Emphasis was placed on primary views, - symbolism, - reference to legends, - mystery and illusion – sequence and contrast and - the emphasis on time. The last of these refers to momentary, diurnal, annual, generational and eternal time frames. There was less emphasis on functionality. For example paths were not necessarily easy and direct but would often be winding and with a rough surface to consciously slow down the visitor (as on the Island of Whispering Birds).

In ancient China, mandarins, scholars and the landed gentry formed a distinct social class. It was this class that created and maintained the distinctive form of the traditional scholar's garden. Gardens sometimes reflected the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism, with its restrained formality and hierarchy, although this was more often found indoors. The outdoors on the other hand was dominated by Taoist concepts with their contrasting vague suggestion, romantic association, refuge, contradictions and contrast.

Chinese gardens reflected a profound and ancient view of the world and they often made reference to scenic grandeur and magical dwelling places in legends, poetry and painting. The viewer needs to see a Chinese garden as an idealised, ancient and magical world of metaphor, illusion and fantasy.

Contrast:

Contrast in many different forms is also an extremely important element of a Chinese Garden. There is the contrast between rocks and flat areas of water, between momentary and eternal time frames (a butterfly and rocks); natural elements and brightly painted structural features. In this respect painted surfaces need to be kept clean and shiny, rocks kept covered in moss and lichen and paving swept but not cleaned with a water jet. The mellowing effect of time and the impression of a garden where 'something has happened' / 'time has passed' is highly valued. The patina of time, the darkening of masonry and old looking trees are valued.

Contrast in spaces is important. In the Chinese Scholar's Garden passing from the open Blossom Court the viewer progresses through the tunnel of the Scented Arbour to the open Gallery Walk and pond. Then the Bamboo Grove provides further enclosure before the open area of the Wind in the Pines Lookout. It is common in a Chinese garden to have this sequence with its contrast of open and closed spaces planned as a progression to be revealed bit by bit. The parts of the garden are separated and screened from each other with walls to make the garden appear larger than it is and to create refuges that traditionally would have been valued in large family households.

Taoist Rocks:

Rock groups are a particularly important element in Chinese gardens and were usually chosen for their contorted, sculptural form. Within this garden the Blossom Court rocks are representative of Taihu type rocks and offer a mysterious, undefined, Taoist appearance. The rocks are almost treated as sculptures. The rocks in this garden were obtained locally, other than the Taihu rock gifted by Wuxi City. This rock, located in the Court of the Frozen Cloud, comes from Lake Taihu, next to Wuxi. It is typically more contorted and full of holes. Taihu rocks were often seen as light nebulous elements and metaphors. For example they may be likened to frozen clouds from which that courtyard takes its name.

The rocks alongside the Moon and Lily Pond are representative of the chunky, brown, sometimes fractured, Huang shi type rocks set in a traditional arrangement for a pond edge, looking neither artificial nor natural. They play an important part of a common 'game' in Chinese gardens, of imagining scenes at a vastly different scale. So the rock may be seen as a cliff face, moss as trees and a floating leaf as a Chinese junk.

Illusion:

In a Chinese garden a lot is left to the imagination, like an unfinished sentence. The viewer should not be able to grasp the total layout or the extent of the garden, or how to get to the pavilion or how to get out. In part it is a stylised illusion of natural scenery such as – distant mountains, wilderness, rocky outcrops, hills, cliffs, valleys, dense thickets, mysterious caves and fabulous landscapes of dreams and legends. Rocks and plants are used to represent distant mountains and peaks. Fleeting moments, such as ripples on a pond, a butterfly, the reflection of the moon, or a distant sound are valued. (A wind chime is installed within the Garden to give a sound that may create the right atmosphere).

While distant views such as the river were sometimes brought into the garden, most city gardens were inward looking. Practical elements were generally screened so that it would be highly inappropriate to see modern irrigation equipment.

Just as there are different layers of meaning, there are different layers of space; some separated by walls punctuated with symbolic doors and windows. These spaces gradually reveal themselves, offering surprises and mysteries like a giant Chinese puzzle.

A Chinese garden recognises primary and secondary views and emphasis is given to creating, framing and enhancing the primary views. In this garden there are four primary views. – along the Blossom Walk to Golden Pavilion – through the Moon Gate to the pond – from the Wisteria Bridge across the Moon and Lily Pond to the Golden Pavilion and from the Wind in the Pines Lookout over Celestial Yuan down to the river.

Hidden Symbolism:

There are many symbols within the Chinese garden and occasionally new meanings are revealed by visitors from China. Some of these are straightforward like the blossom shaped door, blossom patterns and blossom trees in the Blossom Court. The trick is to find such symbols and a key to all of this garden's secret symbols and allusions would be inappropriate because such a garden should have hidden depths of meaning and keep its own secrets.

As a guide the following are some of symbols involving animals within this garden. The fish at each end of the entrance gate structure symbolise surplus and plenty. The Chinese word for 'fish' and 'surplus' are homonyms. The lattice window to the side of the entrance has a traditional pattern representing bats, a sign of good luck and prosperity for the Chinese. Goldfish in the pond represent wealth (gold) and 'fish' surplus. It is also good luck to have birds nesting in the Ting Pavilion (not good luck if you have the job of cleaning the seats below) because birds are said to favour the buildings of the wealthy. The bronze turtle, a figure from Wuxi legend, is the Celestial Yuan of Taihu, a giant turtle sent by the Dragon King to save the people of Wuxi. It is symbolically protecting this garden from floods and providing the cerebral

/spiritual linkage to the river that will be found in all of the riverside gardens within Hamilton Gardens.

Various plants represent good fortune in love, wealth, long life and many progeny. A Chinese garden could almost be viewed as a collection of good luck charms to promote good fortune and cover all eventualities. The pines are used to represent longevity and so are pruned to look old and gnarled. While it is a challenge to grow and control the size of a willow adjacent to the Willow Bridge it is important to have this willow both as a symbol for suppleness and meekness, and because it is traditional to have a willow with a willow bridge (Like the pattern on the Willow Pattern plates).

The four symbols carved on the corners of the Willow Bridge represent the four main Chinese philosophies, which have shaped this garden. The Confucian Hat represents Confucianism and Yin-Yan symbolises Taoism. The Bagua (octogram) was used in ancient times for oracles and predictions in human affairs. The Wheel of Reincarnation is a symbol of Buddhism.

Plants:

In The Chinese Scholar's Garden, a compromise has been made between local horticultural expectations and the original Chinese gardens where plants were less important and large areas of brushed earth were common and plants we might consider weeds were used. Plants and horticultural interest in a Chinese garden were secondary to the rocks and their placement. In this garden, plant labels are inappropriate, and compost mulch is used in preference to modern bark mulch.

Planting aims to conform to nature so a willow is planted by water, bamboo on a hillside and windblown pines on a hill. Otherwise plants were selected for textural contrast or to represent a verdant mountain forest. Clumps or groves of the same tree were valued.

Shaping of plants and plant groups is important and they need to be pruned regularly to keep them in scale. Some pruning serves practical purposes, such maintaining views, controlling size, or maintaining a screen to the adjacent English and Modernist Gardens. Other pruning is to achieve an aesthetic ideal, such as the shape of the two pines beside the Ting Pavilion, which are particularly important.

Naming:

Naming of features is very important in a Chinese garden and there is often protracted discussion about this and sometimes famous people are given the honour of naming a feature during special ceremonies. The Chinese name of the Chinese Scholar's Garden is 'Yichang-Yuan' which means 'Garden of Retreat in flowing happiness'. The name relates to a famous garden in Wuxi.

Many names are obscure and refer to subtle impressions or momentary natural features. 'Wind in the Pines Lookout' refers to the sound of the wind, not the view or adjacent Pavilion. 'Island of Whispering Birds' refers to the soft twittering birds (originally it was planned to have caged birds behind the wall). 'Moon and Lily Pond' refers to the reflection of the moon at certain times of the year. 'The Arbour of Lingering Fragrance' is to be maintained as a very dark, cave like passage where you cannot see much so that you are more aware of the fragrance of the Jasmine causing you to linger. The 'Grotto of Enlightenment' refers to the golden late afternoon rays of sunlight that are reflected off the shimmering water surface onto the small Buddhist monk set inside the Grotto. (The figure is of Xuan Zang who in 629AD took the silk route to India to study Buddhism. After 17 years of wandering he brought home 657 books of scriptures and established Buddhism in China). The Ting Pavilion, which is a replica of a ting in Wuxi, is called 'Leaning-against-river-pavilion'. The other name is the 'Golden Pavilion' a reference to the tile colour which was usually reserved for the emperor and represents wealth (gold). The red on the pavilion is also important representing good luck and prosperity.

Future Development:

The Chinese Garden Trust has a continuing interest in this garden's maintenance and use and may possibly add or approve further features. Consideration has been given to adding Chinese poetry and calligraphy to draw out hidden meanings from this garden. A Buddhist stupa (a kind of finial) may also be set in the pond.

Background:

A Chinese Garden Trust was formed in 1986 to raise funds and oversee the development of the Chinese Garden. The garden was a joint project between the Hamilton City Council, Hamilton's Sister City, Wuxi, the NZ Chinese Association (Waikato Branch) and the New Zealand China Friendship Society (Hamilton Branch). Work on the Garden officially commenced with the planting of a Magnolia (officially called 'The Friendship Tree) in the Blossom Court by the Mayor of Wuxi, Mr Wu Donghua on 5 July 1986.

Most of the garden was developed between 1988 and 1991 at a cost of about \$250,000. A lot of the construction was undertaken by people working the Project Employment Programme (PEP), a government subsidised work scheme.

A ceremony to mark the capping of the Ting Pavilion by Hamilton's Mayor, Ross Jansen, was undertaken in 1989. The Taihu rock was presented to the garden by Mr Lei Huanwen, President of the Wuxi Municipal People's Association for Friendship at a ceremony on 17 March 1991. Mr Wang Hong-min, Mayor of Wuxi, and Margaret Evans, Mayor of Hamilton formally opened the garden, on 28 February 1992. On 1 October 1998 a Wuxi delegation presented the Celestial Yuan of Taihu (bronze turtle).

Recommended Reading: [* Highly recommended.]

Most good books being written on Chinese gardens are recent.

Chinese Garden Style by Faith & Geoff Whiter (1988)

Creating a Chinese Garden by David H Engel (1986)

The Chinese Garden – Art, History and Architecture by Maggie Keswick (1978) *

The Craft of Gardens by Ji Cheng (1988)

The Garden Art of China by Chen Lifang & Yu Sianglin (1988) *

The Gardens of China – History, Art and Meaning by Edwin T Morris (1983)

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