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The Symbolism of the Taoist Garden

by

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The development of the typical Chinese garden with its full *yin-yang* symbolism was essentially Taoist in origin. The Han Emperors had earlier created vast artificial landscapes or parks with mountains, ravines, forests, rivers, lakes, and open spaces to provide a habitat for hordes of game for hunting, but during the time of the Six Dynasties and the T'ang, when Taoism prevailed, there developed the quiet intimacy of the Taoist garden, intended to reflect heaven on earth. It became a symbol of Paradise where all life was protected and sheltered. The park had been given over to the grandiose, the artificial, extravagant, and luxurious, to the hunter and aggressor; the Taoist garden was a place of naturalness and simplicity, a haven for the sage, scholar, and nature lover.

Both landscape painting and garden-making owe their development to the Taoist philosophers who derived their inspiration from Nature as the Mother of All Things, the womb of life, eternal renewal, with her rhythms and moods. What was said of the painting of a landscape applied equally to the creation of a garden: "Chinese painters intuitively felt these same forms to be the visible, material manifestations of a higher all-embracing Reality; the Word made—not flesh—but Living Nature."[1] Or: "The Sages cherish the Tao within them, while they respond to the objective world.… As to landscapes, they both have material existence and reach to the realms of the Spirit.… The virtuous follow the Tao by spiritual insight and the wise take the same approach. Landscapes capture the Tao by their forms and the virtuous take pleasure in them. Is this not almost the same thing?… The Divine Spirit is infinite, yet it dwells in forms and inspires likeness, and thus truth enters into forms and signs."[2] But while landscapes portrayed the vastness and grandeur of Nature, the garden revealed her intimate aspect.

All forms of art are the outward and visible expression of *Ch'i*, the Cosmic Breath or Energy, with which all creation must be in accord, whether it be painting, poetry, music, or the creation of a garden. Indeed, all these arts developed side by side, for the Chinese scholar was expected to be capable of interpreting the same inspiration in all three arts together and the place of both their inspiration and expression was most usually the garden, this term being applied also to the rural retreat of a sage or hermit where in some remote and beautiful scenery a hut had been built and round it trees planted. In a well-designed garden it should be difficult to distinguish between the work of man and Nature. One

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[1] Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

[2] From the *Hua shan-shui hsü*. Preface to Landscape Painting by Tsung Ping.

should “borrow scenery from Nature” and the ideal place was “among trees in the mountains.” Wherever it was, the garden was a place of quiet, meditation, and communion with Nature, whether in wild scenery beside a waterfall, or a trickling stream, or in a bamboo grove, or the courtyard of a city dwelling.

The garden is “the natural home of man” and house and garden were situated according to *feng-shui* (wind and water) influences in harmony with the currents of *Ch’i*; these were held in balance in both the house and garden, as in Nature, by the *yin-yang* forces. The *yin* lunar and *yang* solar powers were represented by the *yin* valleys and waters and the *yang* mountains and sky with all their endless *yang* and *yin* qualities such as sunshine and shadow, height and depth, heat and cold.

However small the space utilized, the garden was never laid out as a flat expanse from which all could be viewed at once. This removal of any definite boundary made for succession, expansion, rhythm, and a sense of unlimited time and space. The garden, like Nature, is ever-changing, a place of light and shade with a life-breath (*Ch’i yün*) which is in harmony with the rhythms of the seasons and their contrasts in weather. Irregularity of line also suggests movement and life. “Everything that is ruled and symmetrical is alien to free nature.”[3] Or, as it has been said: “The awareness of change, the interaction symbolized by the *yin-yang* theory, has caused Chinese gardeners to seek irregular and unexpected features which appeal more to the imagination than to the reasoning faculty of the beholder. There were certain rules and principles for gardening, but these did not lead to any conformity. The basic elements were the same for landscape painting, *shan shui* or ‘mountain and water’”[4] which might be imposing scenery or simply a pond and rocks. The smallest space could be converted into an effect of depth, infinite extension, and mysterious distance; groves, rockeries, bushes, winding paths, all helped to lure on beyond the immediate scene. As Rowley says of Western and Chinese art: “We restrict space to a single vista as though seen through an open door; they suggest the unlimited space of nature as though they had stepped through that open door.”[5]

The entire garden must be considered in association and relationship with all things in Nature. Chang Ch’ao says: “Planting flowers serves to invite butterflies, piling up rocks serves to invite the clouds, planting pine trees serves to invite the wind,… planting banana trees serves to invite the rain, and planting willow trees serves to invite the cicada.” These are all traditional symbolic associations.

In the past in China, though man was the mediator between Heaven and Earth, he was not the measure of the universe; his place was simply to maintain the balance and harmony between the *yin* and the *yang*. It was Nature which was the Whole, and controlling cosmic power. The garden helped man in his work of maintaining harmony; it also had an ethical significance and influence. According to Ch’ien Lung it had “a refreshing effect upon the mind and regulated the feelings” preventing man from becoming “engrossed in sensual pleasures and losing strength of will.” Its pleasures were simple, natural, and

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[3] From the *Yüan Yeh*, a Ming treatise on gardening.

[4] Yang Yap & A. Cotterell, *The Early Civilization of China*.

[5] *Principles of Chinese Painting*, Princeton, 1947.

spiritual. A Suchou poet wrote of the garden: “One should enter it in a peaceful and receptive mood; one should use one’s observation to note the plan and pattern of the garden, for the different parts have not been arbitrarily assembled, but carefully weighed against each other like the pairs of inscribed tablets placed in the pavilions,[6] and when one has thoroughly comprehended the tangible forms of objects one should endeavor to attain an inner communication with the soul of the garden and try to understand the mysterious forces governing the landscape and making it cohere.”

The garden was for all seasons with their changing moods and colors, flowers and trees, so the pavilion and open gallery were necessary for enjoyment in the heat of summer or the cold of winter and became an integral part of the scenery. Even in winter one sat out in the pavilion to admire the beauties of the snow and to watch the budding of the almond and plum blossom. A portable brazier of glowing charcoal kept one warm and a large brazier was used to melt the snow to make tea. The garden was particularly evocative by moonlight and the new and full moons, times of spiritual power, had their own festivals, especially the festival of the mid-autumn moon. Other festivals were also celebrated in the pavilion or garden; the vernal equinox, observed on the twelfth day of the second month of the Chinese year, was known as the Birthday of the Flowers.

Pavilions and galleries obviously had to blend with their surroundings. The *Yüan Yeh* says: “Buildings should be placed so as to harmonize with the natural formation of the ground.” When pavilions were connected by galleries these followed the rise and fall and curves of the land or winding of the waters which were often crossed by bridges, bringing in all the symbolism of the crossing of the waters, of transition, of communication between one realm or plane and another, as well as of man as mediator, occupying the central position between the great powers. Added beauty and symbolism was introduced in the “moon bridge,” a lovely half-circle which when reflected in the clear water below formed the perfect circle of the full moon.

Roofs were curved and painted and the lattice work of the balustrades was lacquered and painted in harmonizing and symbolic colors. Harmony and proportion had to be maintained but symmetry was alien to Nature, thus the garden contained no such thing as clipped lawns or hedges or stiff geometrically designed flower beds, or flowers marshaled in rows or patterns. And “landscaping” had to absorb buildings and, like planted trees, make them look as if they had grown there. “One erects a pavilion where the view opens and plants flowers that smile in the face of the spring breeze.”[7] It was a place for both relaxation and active enjoyment, for solitary meditation and study, or for convivial gatherings for friends to meet and drink tea or wine or take *al fresco* meals. There they composed poetry and music, painted, practiced calligraphy or discussed philosophy. One amusement was to compose a poem in the time that it took a floating wine cup and saucer to drift from one end to the other on a meandering water-course set in the floor of the pavilion. A poet failing to complete his poem in the time had to catch and empty the cup. These water-courses could also be constructed in symbolic forms such as the swastika, or the cross-form

[6] Pairs of tablets were inscribed with parallel quotations which corresponded in tonal value and content.

[7] The *Yüan Yeh*.

of the Chinese character for the number ten, or in the shape of a lotus or open flower. Sometimes the water tumbled over small waterfalls or rocks.

Pavilions were given names such as the Pavilion of the Hanging Rainbow, the Fragrance of the Lotus, the Secret Clouds, the Eight Harmonious Tones, Invitation, or Contemplation, of the Moon, Welcoming Spring, Pleasant Coolness, and so on. In some gardens there were Halls of the Moon; these were constructed in the shape of a hemisphere, the vaulted ceiling painted to represent the nocturnal sky with innumerable small windows of colored glass depicting the moon and stars. The total effect was one of the subdued light of a summer's night. Sometimes the floor was planted with flowers, but more usually it contained running water, the moon and water being closely allied: "The moon washes its soul in the clear waters," but although moon and waters are both *yin* water is symbolically related to the sun since the waters catch and reflect back the sun's light, the *yang.* These halls could be large enough for holding banquets or of a smallness suitable for intimate sitting about in conversation or listening to music and poetry. Here, in the garden, where heaven and earth meet, music and poetry become the natural form of the expression of harmony.

While the pavilion was built in and for the garden and was open to it, this breaking down of the distinction between in and out of doors applied also to the dwelling house which was not only sited for *feng-shui* but for fitting as naturally as possible into the scenery and giving access so immediately to the garden that there seemed no dividing line. Doors either did not exist or were left open. (Socially, closed doors were not considered courteous since they implied exclusion, while the open door symbolized the welcome extended by the essentially outgoing Chinese temperament with its spontaneous and natural relationships developed over the ages in the highly socialized life of a large family). Doors were often only a means of enhancing a view into the garden or to the scenery beyond, such as the moon door, a beautifully placed circle framing some special outlook. Not only was every aspect used to its full natural advantage but "if one can take advantage of a neighbor's view one should not cut off the communication, for such a 'borrowed prospect' is very acceptable."[8]

The house opened on to the garden and the garden came into the house; rooms opened on to the courtyards where flowering trees grew and ferns and flowers fringed a central pool, usually with golden carp swimming in it, for the garden was a place for animal and bird life also. Indeed, animals and plants were not considered the only 'living' things; everything shares in the cosmic power and mountains and rivers also 'live.' Nor was it at all unusual for the house to go out into the garden, for the lover of nature would move a bed out of doors, beside some special tree, shrub, or flower which was coming into bloom, so that no stage of its development and beauty would be lost; or one would sit up all night to enjoy the effect of the moonlight. "The moonlight lies like glittering water over the countryside. The wind sighs in the trees and gently touches the lute and the book that lie on the couch. The dark rippled mirror of the

[8] Ibid.

water swallows the half-moon. When day dawns one is awakened by the fresh breeze; it reaches the bed and all the dust of the world is blown out of one's mind."[9]

The garden was not, however, merely aesthetic but creative and a reminder of, and contact with, the creative forces and the great cycle of the seasons, birth, maturity, decay, death and rebirth.

The merging of the native Taoism with imported Buddhism in Ch'an, or Zen, carried on the tradition of the intimate relationship between man and Nature. Ch'an Buddhism and gardens were two facets of Chinese inspiration which were adopted and carried on by the Japanese, but in later decadent times the original symbolism of the garden as a reflection of Paradise was lost and gardens became mere pleasure grounds, except where attached to monasteries in which much of the symbolism was taken over and where the association with meditation remained. In those gardens of effete times artificial extravagances crept in; windows were made in shapes which bore no relationship to symbols, such as teapots, animals, vases, and fans, even if some of these forms had, in fact, a symbolic content. But these aberrations were stigmatized by the *Yüan Yeh* as "stupid and vulgar" and "intelligent people should be careful in such matters." (Shades of plastic cranes and gnomes!)

The garden was a reflection of the macrocosm and embodied all the *yin-yang* dualisms projected in manifestation. Mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, were all represented. As Cheng Pan ch'iao said: "The enjoyment of life should come from a view regarding the universe as a garden… so that all beings live according to their nature and great indeed is such happiness."

The importance of water in the Chinese garden was not only due to *yin-yang* symbolism but to the wide significance of water itself as, next to the Dragon, the greatest Taoist symbol. It is strength in weakness, fluidity, adaptability, coolness of judgment, gentle persuasion, and passionlessness. While mountains and rocks are the bones of the body and the earth its flesh, rivers and streams are the arteries and blood, life-giver and fertilizer. Flowing water and still water symbolized movement and repose and the complementary opposites, and water-worn stones represented the interaction of the soft and the hard. Still water also takes on all the symbolism of the mirror.

Water could be made by forming lakes and rivers in the earth excavated for making mountains, though mountains were most frequently represented by rocks, hollow and weather-worn, fretted out by the restless sea or the elements or formed from the strange shapes of petrified trees. These rocks were carefully selected for their color, texture, grain, and shape; some were upright and towering, others, larger at the top than at the base, gave the effect of disappearing into the clouds, others, lying down, took fantastic animal shapes, some gave out a note when struck, others were mute. Sometimes the rocks formed grottoes, but whatever the shape they always appeared as natural to the setting and were as near to the form of wild mountain crags as possible, giving the impression of Nature, untamed and capricious. (In this "naturalness" it must be remarked that the mountains of China in the Yangtze gorges, the far West, and the Southern provinces have been worked by nature herself into fantastic and sometimes grotesque

[9] Ibid.

shapes.) “Try to make your mountains resemble real mountains. Follow Nature’s plan” but “do not forget they have to be built by human hands.”[10]

Symbolically, the mountain is of course the world axis, but in the Chinese garden it also represented the *yang* power in Nature with the waters as the *yin*; the “mountain” is traditionally placed in the middle of a lake or pond, the rock being the stable and eternal, the water the flowing and temporal. This mountain-and-water (*shan shui*) symbolism also obtains in landscape painting. The rock and the shadow it casts are also *yang* and *yin*. Rocks are “silent, unmovable, and detached from life, like refined scholars.” Their ruggedness also suggests the challenging and dangerous element in the mountains and in life.

In larger gardens the mountains were sufficiently high for the formation of small valleys and dales, with winging streams opening out into lakes on which boat journeys could be taken and where the water could be spanned by bridges. Sometimes a series of islands or rocks were so connected. Tunnels in the rocks gave the same effect and carried the same symbolism as bridges in passing from one world to another. But “even a little mountain may give rise to many effects… a small stone may evoke many feelings.”[11] Shen Fu says: “In the designing of a rockery or the training of flower trees one should try to show the small in the large and the large in the small and provide for the real in the unreal and the unreal in the real. One reveals and conceals alternately, making it sometimes apparent and sometimes hidden.”

Both the *yang* mountain and the *yin* tree are axial and so represent stability and balance between the two great powers; they also offer a line of communication for man between the celestial *yang* forces coming down to earth and the earthly *yin* forces reaching up to heaven, with man again as central and responsible for the maintenance of balance and harmony in responding equally to the *yin* and *yang* powers.

Trees were an essential feature of both the domestic and hermitage garden, particularly the latter where they were often the only addition made by man to the natural scenery and their variety was almost as important as the trees themselves. While all trees are beautiful and symbolize the feminine power, some were especially noted for their *yin-yang* qualities. Though *yin* as a tree, the pine and cedar express *yang* masculine dignity and rigidity in contrast to the feminine gracefulness, pliability, and charm of the willow, both these trees were considered necessary to maintain the *yin-yang* harmony. Flowering trees such as the almond, cherry, plum, and peach were esteemed—one should say loved—for their beauty and their symbolism. The almond, as the first flower of the year, is in many traditions the Awakener, watchfulness. As flowering in winter it is also courage in adversity. The cherry depicts delicacy of feeling and purity of feeling on the *yin* side and nobility on the *yang*. The plum, a symbol of winter and beauty signified strength and longevity and the hermit. It is one of the favorite subjects for artists and the plum, pine, and bamboo were called “the three friends of winter.” The almond and plum are both symbolic of new life coming in spring, but the plum should have a gnarled trunk and branches, called sleeping dragons, as the *yang* to offset the delicate blossoms of the *yin*; they also represent the old and new

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

together. Just as lovers of the garden would move their beds out under trees, so we read of artists who wandered all night in the moonlight to catch every phase of the beauty of "the dry limbs clad in jade-white blooms."

The peach holds a special position as the tree of the Taoist genii or Immortals; it is the Tree of Life at the center of Paradise. It is also the Tree of Immortality and one bite of the fruit growing on the tree in Paradise confers immediate immortality. Peach stones were apotropaic and were beautifully and symbolically carved and kept, or worn, as amulets and talismans. The tree is a symbol of spring, youth, marriage, wealth, and longevity.

Preeminent among flowers were the lotus, peony, and chrysanthemum. The peony is the only purely *yang* flower. Flowers, with their cup shape, naturally depict the *yin* receptive aspect in nature, but the peony is a royal flower, flaunting the red, fiery, masculine color; it is also nobility, glory, riches. The chrysanthemum, on the other hand, is a flower of quiet retirement, the beloved flower of the cultured scholar, the retired official, who was of course also a scholar, the philosopher, and poet. It was so much cultivated in retirement that it became a symbol of that life and of leisure. It signifies longevity as being that which survives the cold and as autumnal it is harvest and wealth, but it is primarily ease, leisure, joviality, and enjoyment. Yüan Chung-lang said that the retired and the scholar were fortunate in having "the enjoyment of the hills and water, flowers and bamboo" largely to themselves since "luckily they lie outside the scope of the strugglers for fame and power who are so busy with their engrossing pursuits that they have no time for such enjoyment."

But the lotus, a universal symbol in the East (its symbolism is taken on by the lily and sometimes the rose in the West) is "the flower that was in the Beginning, the glorious lily of the Great Waters… that wherein existence comes to be and passes away." It is both *yin* and *yang* and contains within itself the balance of the two powers; it is solar as blooming in the sun and lunar as rising from the dark of the waters of pre-cosmic chaos. As the combination of air and water it symbolizes spirit and matter; its roots bedded in the darkness of the mud depict indissolubility; its stem, the umbilical cord of life, attaches man to his origins and is also a world axis; rising through the opaque waters of the manifest world, the leaves and flowers reach and unfold in the air and sunlight, typifying potentiality in the bud and spiritual expansion and realization in the flower; its seeds, moving on the waters are creation. The lotus is associated with the wheel both as the solar matrix and the sun-wheel of cycles of existence. Iamblichus calls it perfection, since its leaves, flowers, and fruit form the circle. As lunar-solar, *yin-yang*, the lotus is also the androgyne, the self-existent. It has an inexhaustible symbolism in Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism alike. Again it appears as both solar and lunar associated with sun gods such as Surya and lunar goddesses such as Lakshmi; solar with Amitabha and lunar with Kwan-yin and androgynous in Kwannon. The lotus is the Golden Flower of Taoism, the crystallization and experience of light, the Tao. While on the spiritual level it represents the whole of birth, growth, development, and potentiality, on the mundane level it depicts the scholar-gentleman who comes in contact with mud and dirty water but is uncontaminated by it. Apart from its almost endless symbolism, the lotus is a flower of great beauty and highly evocative; as Osvald Sirén says, a sheet of lotus blossom "emanates a peculiar magic, an

atmosphere that intoxicates like fragrant incense and lulls like the rhythms of a rising and falling mantra."[12]

Ancient China understood many things which are only now reaching the West and being hailed as new discoveries. She anticipated by centuries the "discovery" that flowers and plants have feelings. Yüan Chung-lang knew that they have their likes and dislikes and compatibilities among other vegetation and that they respond to care and appreciation in more than a material way. The flowers in a Chinese garden were genuinely loved, but not in any "precious" aestheticism, rather in an intimate relationship between living individuals. He said that "flowers have their moods of happiness and sorrow and their time of sleep.… When they seem drunk, or quiet and tired, and when the day is misty, that is the sorrowful mood of flowers.… When they bask in the sunlight and their delicate bodies are protected from the wind, that is the happy mood of flowers.… When the ancient people knew a flower was about to bud they would move their beds and pillows and sleep under it watching how the flower passed from infancy to maturity and finally dropped off and died.… As for all forms of noisy behavior and common vulgar prattle, they are an insult to the spirits of flowers. One should rather sit dumb like a fool than offend them."[13] Among things which flowers dislike are: too many guests; ugly women putting flowers in their hair; dogs fighting; writing poems by consulting a rhyming dictionary; books kept in bad condition; spurious paintings; and common monks talking Zen! On the other hand they do like a visiting monk who understands tea!

Picked flowers and vases of flowers should never be regarded as normal, only as a temporary expedient employed by those living in cities and unnatural places deprived of the hills and lakes or any garden.

For the town-dweller or for one kept indoors of necessity the miniature garden was created; though it was also seen in pavilions it was most usually on the tables of scholars. It, too, symbolized Paradise, the Isles of the Blessed, or the Abode of the Immortals reflected in miniature perfection with the whole range of the *yin-yang* symbolism. Exceptionally beautiful stones or shells were used and there were miniature grottoes, trees, bamboos, and grasses growing among the mountains, valleys, and waters. The making of these gardens was an art in itself; just as Wang Wei maintained that the artist can bring all Nature into the space of a small painting, so the creator of a garden, large, small, or miniature can concentrate the cosmos within its bounds.

Enclosing the whole garden in the city, or where the extent of the garden was limited, was the wall which was used not only as a boundary but as a setting for trees, shrubs, and flowers; it could also provide an aperture which opened up some special view. In the city, where space was restricted, walls were often a garden in themselves, sometimes built with considerable width with a roof-garden effect or with trees and shrubs planted on top and flowers and ferns in the crevices below. Enclosing walls also helped to make the city garden a place where one could find "stillness in turmoil." Apart from the symbolism of the enclosed garden the walls brought in the *yin-yang* significance of the interplay of light and shade.

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[12] *Gardens of China*.

[13] The treatise of *P'ing Shih* by Yüan Chung-lang.

Today China joins the industrial nations of the world in "exploiting" Nature. Hideous concrete blocks of flats, offices, and factories insulate man from any contact with the yellow earth and, sadly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words can be applied: "There is nearly total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilization which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to cooperate with it.… The harmony between man and nature has been destroyed."[14] The *yin-yang* balance has been betrayed.

[14] *Man and Nature,* Allen & Unwin, 1968.