



Politecnico di Milano
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LEARNING FROM THE MASTER OF NETS GARDEN: TOWARDS A NEW HARMONY

Supervisor: Prof. Elena Granata
Student: Marco Voltolina - 916897
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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The present time is marked by a deep ecological and ideological crisis. Solutions cannot be found by operating inside the very system that caused the problems in the first place: radically new paradigms are needed. This thesis explores the possibility of abstracting from Chinese classical gardens principles that can be applied in contemporary architectural projects, with the purpose of establishing a new, harmonious relationship with Nature.

The research takes as a case study the Master of Nets Garden in Suzhou, considered one of the most representative examples of Chinese classical garden. A combination of different methods and techniques is used: field research, bibliographical research, a multi-disciplinary approach that combines architecture with biology, history, philosophy, literature, painting, calligraphy.

Firstly, a general analysis of the garden is conducted. It consists in understanding the logic through which different elements are arranged, spaces are created, and perceptions are suggested to the visitor. Secondly, the study focuses on eight specific sections of the Master of Nets Garden. For each of them, the role of plants is examined, as well as their relationship with space, architecture and the life of the people who inhabited the garden. Thirdly, a comparison is made with an Italian Renaissance garden, the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio. This serves to highlight the peculiarities of Chinese classical gardens, the features that make them unique. Finally, a series of principles is deduced from the Chinese traditional way of approaching Nature and is adapted to contemporary needs. From the Master of Nets Garden, lessons can be learnt on how to create architectures based on the principles of natural harmony, social harmony and interior harmony.

It is hoped that the present research will provide a valuable contribution to the current debate on the ecological and ideological crisis and that it will inspire new approaches for dealing with it.

ABSTRACT (ITALIANO)

L'epoca attuale è segnata da una profonda crisi ecologica e ideologica. Fintantoché si continua a operare all'interno del medesimo sistema che causa i problemi, non si potranno trovare soluzioni: sono necessari paradigmi radicalmente nuovi. La presente tesi indaga la possibilità di astrarre dai giardini classici cinesi dei principi che possano essere applicati a progetti architettonici contemporanei, con l'obiettivo di stabilire un nuovo rapporto armonioso con la Natura.

La ricerca prende come caso studio il Giardino del Maestro delle Reti a Suzhou, considerato uno degli esempi più rappresentativi di giardino classico cinese. Viene adottata una combinazione di diversi metodi e tecniche: ricerca sul campo, ricerca bibliografica, un approccio multidisciplinare che combina l'architettura con la biologia, la storia, la filosofia, la letteratura, la pittura, la calligrafia.

In primo luogo, viene condotta un'analisi generale del giardino, in cui si cerca di comprendere la logica attraverso cui i diversi elementi sono disposti, gli spazi sono creati e le percezioni sono trasmesse al visitatore. In secondo luogo, lo studio si concentra su otto specifiche sezioni del Giardino del Maestro delle Reti. Per ciascuna di esse, il ruolo delle piante viene esaminato, così come la loro relazione con lo spazio, l'architettura e la vita delle persone che abitavano il giardino. In terzo luogo, viene effettuata una comparazione con un giardino italiano rinascimentale, il Giardino Barbarigo a Valsanzibio. In questo modo vengono messe in evidenza le peculiarità dei giardini classici cinesi, le caratteristiche che li rendono unici. Infine, dalla maniera tradizionale cinese di relazionarsi con la Natura viene dedotta una serie di principi, che vengono adattati ai bisogni contemporanei. Dal Giardino del Maestro delle Reti vengono tratte lezioni su come realizzare architetture fondate sui principi dell'armonia naturale, dell'armonia sociale e dell'armonia interiore.

La speranza è che la presente ricerca possa fornire un valido contributo al dibattito contemporaneo sulla crisi ecologica e ideologica di quest'epoca e che possa ispirare nuovi approcci per affrontarla.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

The present time is defined by a deep ecological and ideological crisis. In order to face this crisis, it is necessary to abandon the currently dominant anthropocentric worldview and find radically new paradigms, in architecture as well as in every other discipline. Traditional Chinese culture and architecture, and in particular Chinese classical gardens, offer several valuable teachings on how to establish a harmonious relationship with Nature. Therefore, *the purpose of this research is to understand what contemporary architecture can learn from classical Chinese gardens in order to build a world of natural, social and interior harmony.*

This is a theoretical thesis that combines a critical analysis of Chinese classical gardens with proposals of new ideas for contemporary architecture: on one hand there is the thorough investigation of a case study, the Master of Nets Garden in Suzhou, with the deduction of the principles that govern the relationship between Humans and Nature in traditional Chinese culture, while on the other hand some of those principles are translated into contemporary design strategies.

This thesis will hopefully be a small contribution to one of the most complex and crucial challenges of the 21st century.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Awareness of the current ecological crisis started to rise during the 1960s. One of the first books that addressed this issue was *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, published in 1962. It documented the negative environmental impacts caused by the indiscriminate use of pesticides and accused the chemical industry of spreading disinformation. This work had a powerful influence on environmental movements and ecological thought, and ended up starting a major campaign against the use of DDT¹ in the United States of America and in the rest of the world.

Another important milestone was Kenneth E. Boulding's essay "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth," published in 1966. It pointed out the need for the economic system to adapt to the ecological system and its limited resources.

Then, in the 1970s, the concept of *sustainability* made its appearance. One of its first

1 DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) is a chemical compound that was used as insecticide.

uses was made in 1972 by the Club of Rome¹ in its report on the *Limits of Growth*, written by a team of scientists led by Dennis and Donella Meadows of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The first definition of “sustainable development” was proposed in 1982, when the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development released the report *Our Common Future*, also known as the “Brundtland Report”. According to this document, “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 37).

Since then, the need for sustainable development has become widely recognized and is now considered a crucial challenge that humanity must face. The protection of the environment and the fight against climate change have been addressed by several international summits and documents written by the United Nations, such as *Agenda 21*, an action plan about sustainable development that is the result of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992.

As buildings are responsible for 18% of global emissions, sustainability has become a key issue in architecture. In the course of the last decades, more and more architects started to adopt strategies that reduced the negative impact of buildings on the environment. However, an approach that aims at *limiting* damages, *reducing* waste, *minimizing* negative impacts or, to sum up, that simply tries to be *less bad* than what used to be done in the past, cannot be the answer. Besides, a vision based on the concepts of *limitation*, *restriction* and *guilt* can be enforced only through authoritative top-down strategies, as it is very difficult to have the population accept it. Environmental policies are often considered unpopular by national governments and have to be enforced by supranational institutions like the European Union. It has also recently happened that environmentalist measures, such as taxes on fuel, triggered massive protest movements (e.g. the yellow vests movement in France in 2018 and a protest movement in Ecuador in 2019). When policies like these are imposed by the elites without a real awareness of the people, social injustice is a natural consequence. Only bottom-up movements can succeed in this challenge and, for that to happen, radically new mindsets are needed: the relationship between humans and Nature must be radically rethought.

The ecological crisis is in fact also an ideological crisis, a crisis of thought. The Western techno-scientific rationalist mindset is becoming the only means through which humans are capable of thinking. According to German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the predominance of “calculative thought” over “meditative thought” is deeply connected

¹ The Club of Rome, founded in 1968, includes scientists, economists, businessmen, and politicians from all over the world. Its purpose is to improve human society.

to a vision of the world that considers Nature as an exploitable resource available for mankind's demands (Heidegger, 1954/1977, 1959/1966).

Similar views are shared by contemporary scholars of different disciplinary fields, such as Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari (b. 1976) and Italian mathematician Paolo Zellini (b. 1946). In his book *Homo Deus: Brief History of Tomorrow* (2015/2017), Harari explains how algorithms are today the base of any science. Even living beings, including humans, are now considered just as a set of biochemical algorithms, that can be statistically determined. At the center of this new worldview there is no longer the human being, but *information*. Harari argues that this is a “new religion” and calls it “Dataism”: in the current age, the sources of meaning are no longer human experiences, but data flows. Zellini, on the other hand, in his book *La dittatura del calcolo* (2018, the title can be translated in English as “The Dictatorship of Calculation”), adds that algorithms have become a real “contemporary myth”. Mathematics has abandoned the continuous for the discrete, the analogic for the digital. Zellini argues that, if efficiency became the only goal, thought itself would become a slave: before that happens, humanity should re-learn to think infinity.

In this complex and multi-dimensional crisis, one may wonder what the role of Architecture should be. Throughout history, architects and urban planners have, on one hand, influenced society with their visions of new worlds and utopias and, on the other, concretely changed people's everyday life with the spaces they designed or planned. These are both essential aspects of the architectural profession that can give crucial contributions in order to move towards a brighter future.

It seems necessary for architects to go beyond Western thought and its techno-scientific attitude, beyond mere sustainability. One possibility is to turn to other traditions and explore what ideas they can offer us. Chinese traditional architecture seems to be a particularly promising field, as several consonances between Chinese thought and the contemporary condition have already been highlighted by philosophers and physicists, among others.

An important text in this respect is *The Tao of Physics*, written by Austrian-American physicist Fritjof Capra (b. 1939) in 1975. In this book, the author explores the striking parallels between modern physics and Eastern wisdom, arguing that a consistent view of the world is emerging from physics and that this view is harmonious with the principles of Eastern thought. In 1982 Capra expanded his focus with the book *The Turning Point*, to show how this revolution in physics has foreshadowed a similar change of paradigm in other scientific disciplines such as biology, medicine, psychology and economics.

Other interesting reflections come from the field of comparative philosophy. American philosopher David L. Hall (1937-2001), in his essay on “Modern China and the Postmod-

ern West” (1991), argues that Western postmodern critique of modernity presents remarkable similarities, in terms of program and methods, with certain elements of classical Chinese thought. French philosopher Françoise Jullien (b. 1951), in his book *Vivre de Paysage* (2014/2017, translated in English as “Living Off Landscape”), highlights the consonances between contemporary ecological sensibility and the Chinese conception of landscape, where there is no dichotomy between subject and object.

Other scholars have stressed the similarities between contemporary environmental thought and Daoist principles. Some examples are *Daoism and Ecology* by Norman Girardot, James Miller and Liu Xiaogan (2001) and *China’s Green Religion. Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* by James Miller (2017). Virginia Kane, in *Taoism and Contemporary Environmental Literature* (2001), asserts that “Taoist thought offers an integrated, holistic, and compassionate point of view as a possible meta-foundation for a revised Western environmental ethic” (p. 90). Interesting points have been also made by Anthony Alexander in “Different paths, same mountain: Daoism, ecology and the new paradigm of science” (2008), a study on the analogies between green economics and Daoist notions, and by Sam Mickey in “Without Why: Useless Plants in Daoism and Christianity” (2019), a comparison between the role of plants in Daoist thought and in Heidegger’s philosophy.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to explore the field of Architecture in order to find elements of traditional Chinese wisdom that can be significant for the present time, defined by the ecological crisis. To do so, the research will focus on Chinese classical gardens, and in particular on the Master of Nets Garden in Suzhou, an extraordinary example of architecture founded on a harmonious relationship between Man and Nature.

1.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology that will be used for this research can be summarized in three main steps.

First of all, an in-depth analysis of the Master of Nets Garden in Suzhou, that has been selected as a case study, will be carried out. This will be the longest and most complex phase of the research and will be covered in chapters 2 and 3. Information will be collected both on the field and through bibliographical and sitographical resources. The author will carry out several site inspections in the Master of Nets Garden, taking notes, pictures and sketches, observing the configuration of space and the feelings and perceptions that the garden would convey, and recognizing the main plant species that are present in the different ar-

eas and courtyards.¹ The bibliographical and sitographical research, on the other hand, will include classic books on Chinese gardens, essays and scientific papers, and an ancient text, the *Treatise on Superfluous Things* written by Wen Zhenheng (1585-1645), scholar, painter and garden designer, in the 17th century. A multidisciplinary approach will be adopted, enriching this research with other sources from the fields of biology, painting, literature, music, linguistics, history, philosophy. This is a crucial aspect, as it will grant a wider and deeper understanding of Chinese classical gardens and their implications for the relationship between humans and Nature. In this research, in fact, it is assumed that Architecture is not an autonomous subject, but one that is strongly interconnected with all the aspects of life and of society.

The second step, covered in chapter 4, will be a comparison with an Italian Renaissance garden, the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio. By contrasting a Chinese classical garden with a similar space that belongs to a completely different tradition, it will be possible to better understand its peculiar characters. For this part, the same strategy used for the analysis of the Master of Nets Garden will be followed: site inspection on one hand,² and bibliographical and sitographical research with multidisciplinary sources on the other hand.

Finally, the third step, that will be covered in chapter 5, will be a reflection on the principles that Humankind can learn from Chinese classical gardens in order to face the ecological and ideological crisis and establish a new, harmonious relationship with Nature. This part will rely on sources about Chinese thought as well as Western philosophy, and on the analysis of some examples of modern architectures that follow similar tendencies to those that we can learn from Chinese classical gardens.

1.4 RESEARCH CONTENTS

The research will be composed of six chapters.

1. This introduction, that presents the main question and goals of the research, its background and significance, the methodology that will be followed, the contents that will be included, the outcomes that will be expected, and a brief outline of what Chinese classical gardens are.
2. An analysis of the Master of Nets Garden in Suzhou, that will include: the context in

1 The goal was to carry out four site inspections, one for each season of the year, in order to analyze the garden and its plants in all their possible states. The first and the second inspections have been regularly carried out, one in late summer (September 21st, 2019) and one in autumn (November 24th, 2019). Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, it has not been possible to carry out the third and fourth inspections, that were programmed in winter (February 2020) and spring (April 2020).

2 The site inspection at the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio has been carried out on August 12th, 2020.

which the garden is found (geography, climate, economy, culture); its history, from the creation in the 12th century until the transformation into a tourist attraction during the modern age; its design process and the roles of the different actors who contribute to such process; a description of the garden and of the elements that we can find in it (rocks, water, plants, buildings); an analysis of space and movement in the garden, of its design strategies (thematic units, scenic views, borrowed landscape, long views, polarities, naturalness, multisensoriality) and of the features that inform and enrich its space (walls, doorways, windows, screens, paths, galleries, bridges, pavements, furniture); a reflection on the important role played by names; a brief introduction on how people used to live in the garden.

3. A deeper analysis of eight specific areas of the Master of Nets Garden: the Gather Emptiness Study, the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda, the Zither Chamber, the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda, the Five Peaks Library, the Late Spring Annexe, the Residential Quarters, and the Rosy Cloud Pool. For each of them, a study of the relationship between plants, space and life will be carried out. The biology, history, etymology, symbolism, artistic and literary associations, and traditional uses in garden design of each main species of trees and flowers that can be found in those areas will be described. At the same time, the activities that used to be performed in each space will be reconstructed: meditation, feasts and gatherings, music, art appreciation, calligraphy, flower appreciation, family life, tea drinking, moon watching, romantic encounters. All this information will be summed up in the last paragraph of each section, where the meaning and significance of each area, with its plants, space and activities, will be explained.
4. A comparison between the Master of Nets Garden and an Italian Renaissance Garden, the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio. This part will include: an introduction on the significance of such comparison; a summary of the context and history of the Barbarigo Garden; a description of it and of the elements that we can find in it (water, plants, grottoes and sculptures, buildings); an analysis of space and movement. Furthermore, four specific areas of the garden will be studied in depth: the Labyrinth, the Hermit's Grotto, the Rabbit Island, and the Statue of Time. This will be done with the same method used in chapter 3 for the Master of Nets Garden. Finally, the last section of this chapter will contain some reflections on the differences and similarities between Chinese classical gardens and Italian Renaissance Gardens.
5. What we learn from the Master of Nets Garden that we can apply to contemporary architecture. This part will start with an overview of how the relationship between

Humankind and Nature worked in the Chinese tradition: its origins in the geography of the country, the importance of agriculture for the Chinese civilization, the points of view of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, and how this relationship was reflected in the gardens. Then, the ideas from the Chinese tradition will be brought into our present age through reflections that are organized around three main concepts: natural harmony, social harmony and interior harmony.

6. Finally, the conclusions, in which five principles for the architecture of the 21st century will be established: non-domination, symbiosis, embodiment, spirituality, uselessness. The results obtained with this research will be summarized, together with some suggestions on what needs to be done in order to bring forward the ideas developed in this work.

1.5 EXPECTED OUTCOMES

As discussed in section 1.2, Chinese traditional thought can suggest answers to some of the crucial issues of our time, and this has already been established, for example, in fields such as philosophy, physics, and environmentalism. It seems therefore not particularly far-fetched to assume that this may be the case also for Architecture.

This research aims at establishing a series of principles that can guide contemporary architecture towards a new, more harmonious, relationship with Nature. It is important to stress that the goal here is not to outline the design principles of the Master of Nets Garden and learn how to create a “contemporary Chinese garden”, but rather to understand the deeper philosophical tenets that inform the space of Chinese classical gardens and extract from them new ideas that can be valid for any architecture that is designed today, by anyone and anywhere.

1.6 WHY CHINESE CLASSICAL GARDENS?

The purpose of this research, as well as the methods that will be followed and the contents that will be described, have been sufficiently clarified. Only one question is left: among the different expressions of Chinese traditional architecture, why it is gardens that have been chosen as the case study of this thesis?

Gardens in Chinese culture have a remote origin, first appearing in myths and legends (Paolillo, 1996, pp. 17-25). Throughout history, they evolved into two main typologies: imperial gardens and private gardens. While the former were an expression of the emperor's

power, the latter – on which this thesis focuses – were owned by rich and cultured scholars and had a variety of functions: they were a space for growing fruits, flowers and medicinal plants, a symbol of status, wealth and prestige, a valuable real estate property, a place where the owner would find a retreat from his busy public life, enjoying Nature and practicing art, philosophy and meditation.

Wang Yi, in the preface of his book *A Cultural History of Classical Chinese Gardens* (2015), explains the three reasons why Chinese classical gardens are so important (p. 3). First, he highlights the great complexity that characterizes these places, where natural and artificial elements combine so that “a rich system of landscapes is created to present aesthetic pleasure and to deepen people’s feelings and understanding of beauty.” Other authors go as far as to claim that Chinese classical gardens are “the most sophisticated architectural genre ever devised” (Missingham, 2001, p. 3).

The second argument proposed by Wang Yi is that gardens were a “cultural venue” that incorporated “a variety of artistic and cultural disciplines, including at least painting, philosophy, literature, gardening, all kinds of arts and crafts, interior decorations, artifacts, and all sorts of living, holiday customs and rituals for the daily lives of . . . residents.”

Finally, Wang Yi argues that Chinese classical gardens had a “far-reaching spiritual substance,” being “the artistic embodiment of human spiritual sustenance and the pursuit of artistic transcendence.”

In other words, gardens perfectly represented different aspects of the Chinese civilization: they had a cosmic significance, but they were also the scene where everyday life happened. As Edwin T. Morris wrote, “the garden in China is like our parks, museums and cathedrals all in one” (1983, p. xii).

On a final note, it is important to stress that gardens were, of course, a privileged place for communication and interaction with Nature. It comes with no surprise that, in the search for new ideas and paradigms to solve today’s ecological crisis, Chinese classical gardens can be seen as a potential source of inspiration. Franco Panzini, in his foreword to Bianca Maria Rinaldi’s book *The Chinese Garden* (2012), remarks precisely this aspect:

[Chinese classical] gardens foreshadow environmental sustainability. . . . Far from being a precious intellectual exercise, the search for a harmonious microcosm constitutes a vigorous enunciation of the need for sustainability in all creations. Studying the compositional methods of Chinese Gardens is not only a deeper way to understand one of the great adventures in humanity’s relation with nature, but also an important contribution to the evolution of contemporary . . . architecture. (p. 7)

2. THE MASTER OF NETS GARDEN

2.1 CONTEXT

The Master of Nets Garden is located in Suzhou, in an area south of the Yangzi River also known as “Jiangnan region,” that has always been rich both economically and culturally. Here, for eight hundred years, from the Five Dynasty age (907-960) up to the middle of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), garden culture has thrived and developed, giving birth to an incredible synthesis of Art, Nature and Architecture.

In order to understand the Master of Nets Garden, it is necessary to analyze the context in which it was created and the factors that led to such an extraordinary flourishing of garden culture in this part of the world: geography, climate, economy and culture.

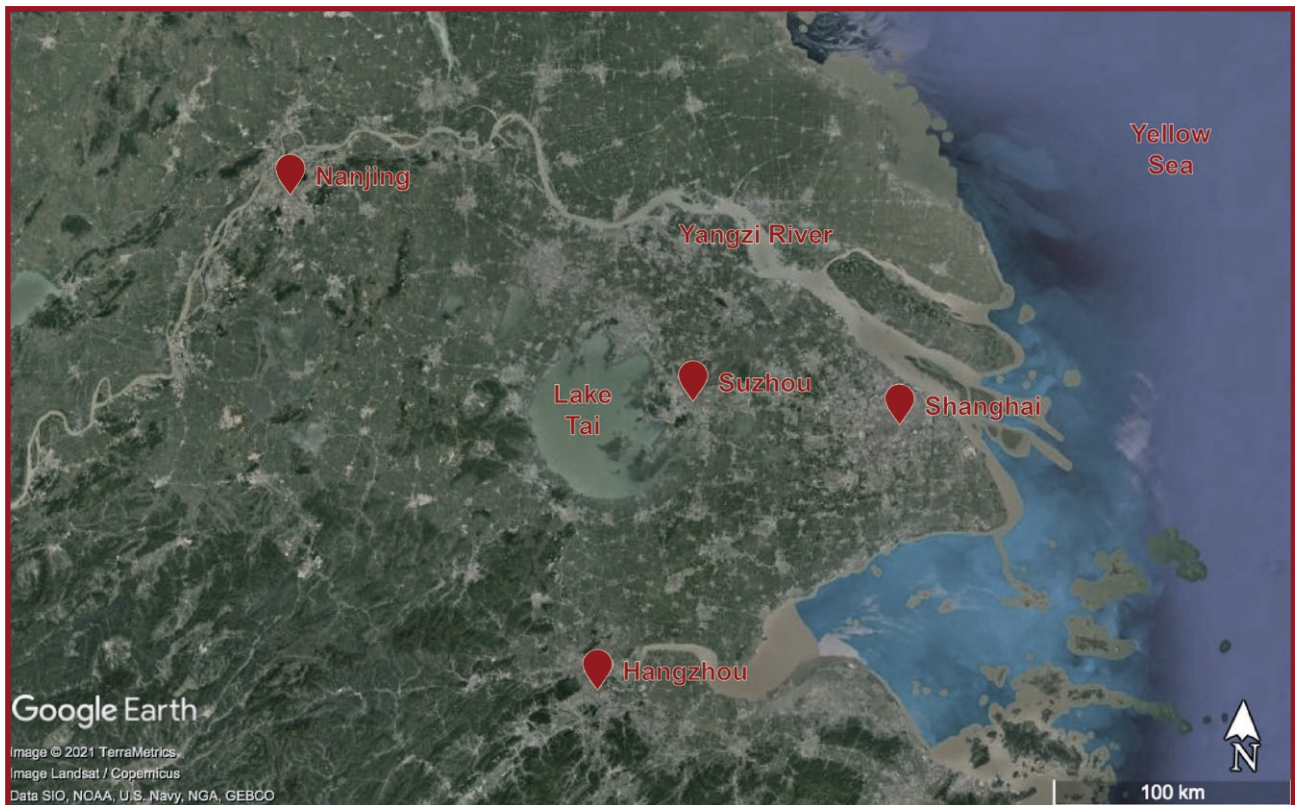
2.1.1 Geography

Suzhou is located in Jiangsu Province, approximately one hundred kilometers north-west of Shanghai and two hundred kilometers east of Nanjing (fig. 2.1.a). The most prominent feature of the region is its richness of rivers and lakes, that cover 18 percent of the territory of Jiangsu. This huge water supply, distributed through a highly efficient hydraulic network, guarantees the irrigation of agricultural fields as well as the transportation of people and goods (fig. 2.1.b).

The impressive advances made by the Chinese civilization in hydraulic engineering are demonstrated by the Grand Canal. Created between 605 and 611 by the Sui Dynasty, it consists in a complex system of waterways that link existing rivers, lakes and canals, connecting Hangzhou, Suzhou, the former capitals of Luoyang and Chang’an, and the area in the north-east of China where today lies Beijing. This monumental infrastructure became a catalyst for economic as well as cultural exchanges.

An extensive network of canals and waterways crisscrossed the city of Suzhou and constituted its most characteristic and appreciated feature. A Tang Dynasty poet described it in his verses:

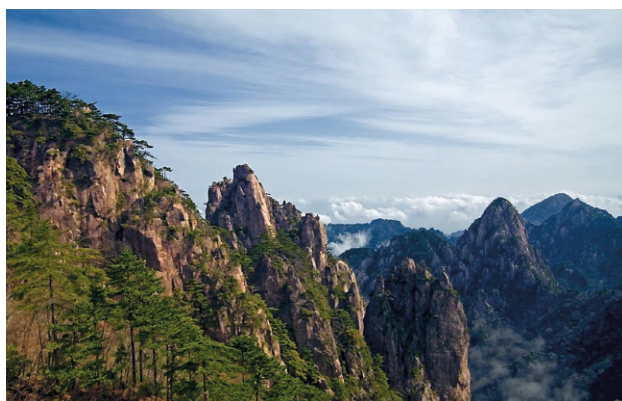
Have you ever been in Suzhou?
Where every house pillows on water?
Ancient palace filled with pavilions,
Canals and bridges too many to count . . . (as cited in Qi, 1995, p. 51)



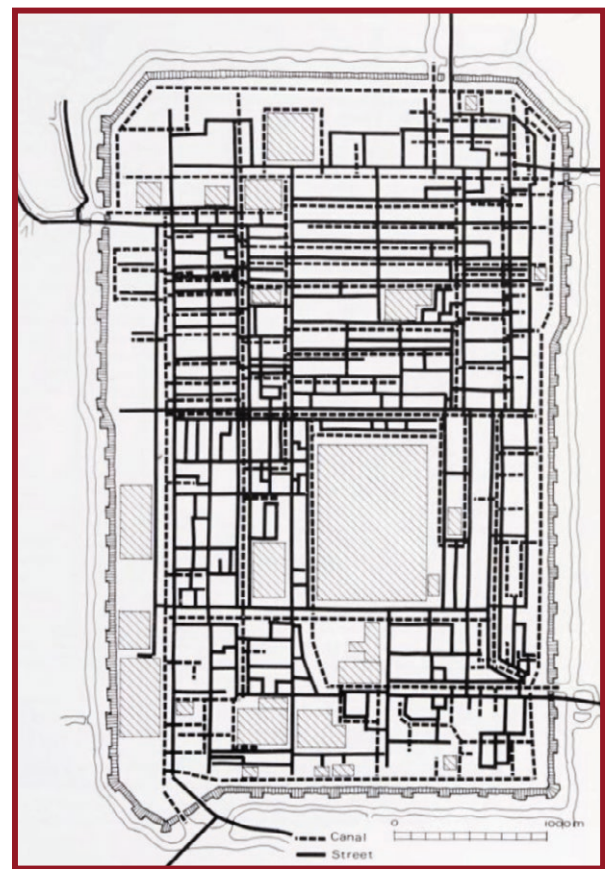
■ Fig. 2.1.a Location of Suzhou.



■ Fig. 2.1.b Hydraulic network around Suzhou.



■ Fig. 2.1.c Mountain range of Huangshan.



■ Fig. 2.1.d Double network of waterways and roads in Suzhou.

A map of Suzhou from 1229, engraved in stone, shows the peculiar urban fabric of the city, with a double network of waterways and roads. The water system is the generator of the plan and is made up of six north-south and fourteen east-west canals. Streets are parallel to waterways, and the two networks overlay and cross each other with more than 350 stone bridges (fig. 2.1.d).

Another important feature of the Jiangnan region is the availability of rocks and stones that could be used in gardens. Especially renowned was the limestone of Lake Tai, one of the largest fresh-water lakes of China, located fifteen kilometers to the west of Suzhou.

Besides, not far from this region lies the mountain range of Huangshan (“Yellow Mountain,” fig. 2.1.c), whose majestic landscapes have been – and are still today – a major source of inspiration for poets, painters and garden designers. From the Tang Dynasty (618-907) up to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), over twenty thousand poetries have been written about these mountains (N. Cao, 2003, pp. 114-127), and an entire school of painting draws its name from them.

2.1.2 Climate

Suzhou has a four-season humid sub-tropical climate. Summers are hot and humid, with temperatures in July that range between 24.8° and 31.6° C, while winters are cool and cloudy. In January, the average minimum temperature is 0.5° and the maximum is 7.7° C.

Humidity is generally high, with values around 67 to 77% all year long. The amount of precipitations is 34.7 mm in December, the driest month, while it reaches 155.6 mm in September, when typhoons and rainstorms can occur. Snowfalls are occasional.

Table 2.1.A Climate data for Suzhou (1961-1990)

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Year |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|------|-------|
| Average high (°C) | 7.7 | 8.6 | 12.7 | 18.6 | 23.5 | 27.2 | 31.6 | 31.5 | 27.2 | 22.3 | 16.7 | 10.6 | 19.9 |
| Daily mean (°C) | 3.7 | 4.6 | 8.5 | 14.2 | 19.2 | 23.4 | 27.8 | 27.7 | 23.6 | 18.3 | 12.4 | 6.1 | 15.8 |
| Average low (°C) | 0.5 | 1.5 | 5.1 | 10.6 | 15.7 | 20.3 | 24.8 | 24.7 | 20.5 | 14.7 | 8.6 | 2.4 | 12.5 |
| Average precipitation (mm) | 39.0 | 58.8 | 81.2 | 102.3 | 114.5 | 152.0 | 128.2 | 133.0 | 155.6 | 60.5 | 51.2 | 34.7 | 1,111 |
| Average relative humidity (%) | 67 | 75 | 70 | 69 | 69 | 75 | 77 | 68 | 74 | 69 | 65 | 68 | 71 |

This climate, with mild winters and high humidity, creates the perfect conditions for growing a large variety of vegetation, especially evergreen species, and allows plants to have longer flowering periods. According to architect Tung Jun (1900-1983),

Favored by nature, Soochow [Suzhou] grows almost any plant peculiar to the north temperate zone. In this city in any big garden one can count more than a hundred species, while in medium and small garden, from twenty to seventy kind. (2018, p. 236)

2.1.3 Economy

Thanks to its geography and climate, the south of China is rich of natural resources and, since ancient times, it has been known as the “land of abundant fish and rice” (Lou, 2003, p. 29). Thus, the area became prosperous, with highly developed agriculture, handicraft and commerce. Suzhou was one of the most populous cities of the Empire and one of the main stops along the trading route of the Grand Canal. Arts and technologies flourished, and craftsmen from southern China gained a great reputation for their carpentry, bricklaying and plastering skills. Besides, starting from the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), when private ownership of land became possible, affluent families started to acquire new lands and enlarge their properties.

2.1.4 Culture

As seen in previous paragraphs, water and rocks were easily available thanks to the geography of the region, climate provided the best conditions for garden vegetation and economic development made possible an accumulation of technical skills as well as financial resources. It seems that all the elements necessary for the realization of a Chinese classical garden have been mentioned: water, rocks, plants, architecture and land. However, the most important factor is still missing: the cultural environment.

It was during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) that an elite of administrative officials, nominated through highly selective examinations based on Confucian classics, was formed. Since then, members of this elite started to be attracted by the developed economy and prosperous urban lifestyle of the Jiangnan region.

In 1127, the Song Dynasty moved the capital of the Empire from Kaifeng to Lin’an (today’s Hangzhou, right in the heart of Jiangnan). Many functionaries and scholars moved together with the court and emerged as the intellectual elite, giving rise to an extraordinary flourishing of the arts: painting, poetry, calligraphy and, of course, garden design.

This prosperity affected the whole region, including Suzhou (or, as it was called at the

time, *Pingjiang*), that became a prominent center for silk production and a cultural hub, with more than 1,200 painters (Qi, 1995, p. 54). Its splendor has been described by Venetian merchant Marco Polo (1254-1324), who visited the city in 1275, at the time of the Yuan Dynasty:

[the citizens of Suzhou] are . . . not men . . . used to the exercise of arms; but I tell you that they are clever . . . merchants and cunning men of all crafts, and also there are very wise men called Sages, like our philosophers, and great natural physicians who know nature very well. Moreover I tell quite truly that there are quite six thousand bridges of stone in this city. (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 99)

2.1.5 The golden age of gardens

The “golden age” of gardens occurred mostly during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. In this period, private gardens were built all over China, not only by scholars, but also by merchants who got rich during the second half of the 16th century, when China (and especially the Jiangnan region) experienced a great economic expansion. By imitating the taste of the literati, they aspired to become part of the elite.

At that time, Suzhou was the most populous non-capital city in the world: by the 16th century, it housed around 500,000 people (Clunas, 1996, p. 16) and featured over 270 gardens (Henderson, 2013, p. 10). The city was a hub for the production and consumption of luxury goods, especially silk, thanks to its high concentration of expectant or retired government officials, that formed a rich and cultured elite.

As the agricultural production of Suzhou and its hinterland became unable to feed the population, the city started to depend more and more on commerce. According to British historian of art Craig Clunas (b. 1954), this process contributed to a change in the role of private gardens, eliminating their productive function and transforming them into places for pure aesthetic appreciation of Nature (1996, pp. 38-59).

The unprecedented creation of a large number of private gardens led to the emergence of the specialized figure of the “garden designer,” as well as to the publication, in 1634, of the first theoretical work on garden design, Ji Cheng’s (1582-1642) *Yuan Ye* (“The Craft of Gardens”).

The “golden age” of garden art reached its peak during the reign of Qing emperors Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1736-1795): by the half of the 18th century, in Suzhou there were 410 private gardens (Qi, 1995, p. 53). Of these, only few survived the wars and revolutions of the last centuries, and many had to undergo massive restorations. However, what we can admire today can still give us a glimpse of the rich and complex garden tradition of China.

2.2 HISTORY

Classical Chinese gardens were dynamic entities, constantly changing and evolving through time. According to Australian historian of architecture Stanislaus Fung (b. 1961),

Chinese gardens are intrinsically ephemeral. Because their appearance varies with the season and time of day, they were not intended to be fixed in design or form. The subsequent addition of inscriptions, buildings, plants and animals, changes of names and alterations to various architectural elements were carried out as a matter of course and were not necessarily considered injurious to the original designs. The constant care of plants and periodic renovation of buildings, mostly constructed of timber, were essential; in turn, such maintenance depended on the continued prosperity of the owners and the well-being of the state. (1996, pp. 85-86)

Several factors contributed to this “rhythm of building and decay” (Clunas, 1996, p. 19): floods, wars, rebellions, economic fluctuations, the state of the materials and frequent changes of ownership, that usually happened once per generation. The fate of a garden and its layout depended heavily on the fortune of its owner, as explained by Qing Dynasty scholar Qian Yong (1759-1844):

I would argue that the decay and flourishing of a garden is allied to that of its owner. If the person is remembered, then even though it decays it will rise again. If the person is not commemorated, then even though it flourishes it will eventually decay. The literary productions of brush and ink are more lasting than are gardens, since the former cannot decay away. Now when I study Wen Zhenming’s¹ paintings, read his record and his poems, I suddenly see the splendors of the towers and terraces, the flowers and trees, and more than three hundred years of decay and restoration, recovery and loss, scattered like cloud and blown by the wind, seems to appear before my astonished eyes. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 17)

Besides, in the course of the centuries the very concept of garden evolved, from being a simple pond surrounded by trees with an agronomic focus during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), to being a complex composition of scenes for pure contemplation of Nature during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

Therefore, even though the current layout of the Master of Nets Garden can be considered as mostly a product of the Qianlong Period (1736-1795) of the Qing Dynasty (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 12), it is important to keep in mind the intricate historical vicissitudes and transformations that have shaped it throughout the centuries.

1 Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) was a painter and calligrapher during the Ming Dynasty.

2.2.1 Creation of the garden

The Master of Nets Garden was first laid out in 1140, during the Shaoxing Period of the Southern Song Dynasty, by Shi Zhenzhi, a high official of the court, who held the position of Deputy Civil Service Minister. He desired to retreat from city life and imperial bureaucracy, enjoying instead the beauty of nature, therefore he built the *Wan Juan Tang* (“Hall of Ten Thousand Books”) and an adjacent garden called *Yu Yin* (“Fisherman’s Retreat”). The image of the fisherman, that appears again and again throughout the history of the garden, symbolizes the simple life of the recluse, his wisdom and rectitude (figs. 2.2.a-b). Song Dynasty painter Guo Xi (c. 1020 - c. 1090) wrote:

Always prefer a garden to cultivate the mind and to live in lofty mountains and water to inspire the heart, seek the pleasure and comforts of the fisherman and wood-cutter, and stay away from the hectic city life that imprisons the mind. (as cited in Henderson, 2013, p. 65)

Today it is not possible to find a detailed description of the garden at the time. The only known facts about it are that it contained a remarkable library and that it could be accessed by boat.



■ **Figs. 2.2.a-b** Window on the southern wall of the Tread-Upon-Harmony Lodge, in the Master of Nets Garden, with decorations that remind of fishing nets.

2.2.2 Qianlong Period

During the following centuries, the garden passed through many hands, and then remained a ruin until the Qianlong Period (1736-1795) of the Qing Dynasty. In fact, it was around the 1760s that Song Zhongyuan (1710-1779), a government official, redesigned it and made it his retirement home. Drastic changes were made to the layout of the garden, but its original spirit was preserved. Song Zhongyuan, who often referred to himself as a fisherman, renamed the place *Wang Shi Yuan* (“Master of Nets Garden”).

It was in this period that the garden started to acquire a high reputation thanks to its literary and pictorial representations. In fact, its most important literary account, titled *Record of the Garden of the Master of Fishing Nets*, was made in 1795 by scholar Qian Daxin (1728-1804). He wrote:

Thirty years ago now the site was acquired by Master Song Zhongyuan to build his villa, with a view to retiring here. He took the name Master of the Fishing Nets both for himself and for his garden, thus giving expression of his desire for rustic seclusion and picking up also upon the sound of the original name of the lane along which his garden was found.¹ (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 19)

Another description of the garden was written by official and poet Shen Deqian (1673-1769) with the title of *Wang Shi Yuan Tu Ji* (“Record of the Painting of the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets”):

With its tower and its belvedere, its terraces and its pavilion, its pool and embankment and pond and barge, the site was now named Retreat of the Master of the Garden of the Fishing Nets and poems were composed about its Twelve Scenes . . . (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 14)

2.2.3 Late Qing Dynasty and Modern Age

In 1795, ownership of the garden passed to scholar Qu Yancun, who made minor rearrangements of buildings, plants and stones. At this time, the place was known as *Qu Yuan* (“Qu’s Garden”). Again, Qian Daxin’s record offers us a valuable testimony of the situation of the garden at the time:

After his [Song Zhongyuan’s] death his garden daily fell into rack and ruin and more than half of its once fine trees and ancient rocks either disappeared or were damaged. Only the pond remained, as clear and as pure as it had been at an earlier age. Master Qu Yancun happened by the site one day and, anxious lest the garden

¹ According to Qian Daxin, the original name of the lane was *Wang Si* (“Whishing Debts”), a close homophone of *Wang Shi* (“Master of the Fishing Nets”).

become completely overgrown, he heaved a deep sigh. Upon enquiry at the neighboring property, he discovered that the then owner of the garden just happened to be seeking a buyer for it, whereupon Qu immediately acquired it. Working in accordance with the garden's original design but creating also new structures, Qu piled up the rocks to form artificial mountains and planted out some trees, all in an appropriate manner, increasing the number of pavilions and kiosks, and thus transforming the old into the new. Once the work had been completed, he summoned four or five of us fellow scholars to join him for an all-day banquet. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, pp. 21-22)

In the following decades, the garden underwent several changes of ownership and design. In 1818, it was acquired by Wu Jidao; in 1868, after the Taiping Rebellion,¹ it became property of Li Hongyi (1831-1885), imperial official and calligrapher, who renamed it *Su Dong Lin* ("Neighbouring Su in the East", a reference to another famous garden that was located nearby). Half of the stelae that can be found in the garden are copies made by him of Wei and Jin Dynasty inscriptions.

In 1907, the place became a possession of the Bannerman Dagui; then, ten years later, was bought by General Zhang Zuolin (1873-1928) and given as a gift to his teacher Zhang Xiluan (1843-1922). During the 1930s, the property was rented out to Ye Gongchuo (1881-1968), a calligrapher and educator who renamed it *Yi Yuan* ("Garden of Idleness"). For several years, in the Late Spring Annexe, at the north-western corner of the garden, lived the artist brothers Zhang Shanzi and Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) with their pet tiger.

In 1940, the eminent collector He Chang (1880-1946) acquired the garden, restored it and gave it back its old name of *Wang Shi Yuan*. He then died in 1946 and, in 1958, his daughter He Zehui donated the garden to the State. For several years, it fell into a state of dilapidation and was occupied by the military. It even risked being transformed into a factory. It was only thanks to historian of architecture Chen Congzhou (1918-2000) that the garden was restored and opened to the public. Since then, its value as a cultural heritage has been widely recognized and it has become a popular tourist attraction.

2.3 DESIGN PROCESS

The design of a classical Chinese garden is the result of a complex interaction between five categories of people: scholars, garden designers, craftsmen, plantsmen and geomancers.

Scholars and garden designers had the most prominent role, providing ideas, themes and concepts with their intellectual abilities and knowledge of literature, art and traditional

¹ The Taiping Rebellion was a civil war that occurred in China from 1850 to 1864 between the ruling Qing Dynasty and the unrecognized Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, commanded by Hong Xiuquan, the self-proclaimed brother of Jesus Christ.

thought, while craftsmen and plantsmen were their subordinates, as their technical skills were considered of a lower level. R. Stewart Johnston notes that, in imperial China, designing a garden was viewed as an activity completely different from designing a building: “landscape design was on a plane with calligraphy, poetry and painting” (1991, p. 38) and it “ranked among the ‘fine’ arts, while architecture, which lacked an intellectual basis, was classified as a craft” (p. 51).

The fifth category, that is geomancers, had a relatively limited role in garden design, at least compared with their importance in the planning of cities and buildings. Nevertheless, they provided the background rules everyone else had to comply with.

Such design process was radically different from the one that was established in the West since the Renaissance, where the architect was the author responsible for the whole project: the interaction needed for creating a Chinese classical garden “increased both the artistic status of the owner and the creative responsibilities of the carpenters, masons, geomancers; even of the rock-art craftsmen” (Blundell Jones & Woudstra, 2014, p. 174).

2.3.1 Scholar

The scholar was the only person in Chinese society that had the education, social status and financial resources needed to build a garden. It was him that provided the ideas on which the design was based, ideas that were often linked to his private life and ambitions. Chinese *literati* were the product of a unique system that lasted around 2,000 years, from 124 BCE until 1912: imperial examinations. To become a high official or functionary, one had to pass extremely selective examinations and prove his knowledge of Confucian classic texts. Thanks to this system, China had a cultured elite capable of conceiving contemplative gardens that were a synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist and, most importantly, Daoist thought, the latter being the tradition most focused on establishing a harmonious relationship with Nature. Besides that, *literati* were often experts in poetry, painting, calligraphy and music, all arts that could enrich the garden with references, meanings and metaphors.

It should be noted, however, that even if private gardens are mainly associated with scholars, they could also be created by rich merchants or, in rural areas, by family clans.

2.3.2 Garden designer

The figure of the garden designer appeared in the 17th century, during the so-called “golden age” of gardens. It was in this period that the art of garden design ceased to be considered a branch of painting and acquired dignity as an independent discipline, with its own specialists and technical literature. The garden designer had to have a well-established

position in society and to be a man of letters, with a deep knowledge of the traditions of painting, poetry and calligraphy: this allowed him to understand the principles that the scholar had in mind. At the same time, he had to have a practical attitude and an experience in thinking in terms of space, time and movement, in order to give to these ideas an adequate three-dimensional shape and to interact in an effective way with the craftsman and the plantsman, who had the task of concretely building the garden.

2.3.3 Craftsman

The craftsman had the practical task of constructing buildings, walls, furniture, sculptures, watercourses, rockeries. He held a technical knowledge passed down orally from one generation to another. There were technical manuals, that had been written since the 3rd century, but his skill was still mostly based on intuition. With a limited number of standardized and modular structures and materials, he had to be able to create a great variety of forms and decorations, producing a complex yet harmonious environment. Even though he was generally considered inferior to the scholar and the garden designer, he played a crucial role, that sometimes might have been recognized, as Daoists saw great virtue in manual activities.

2.3.4 Plantsman

The plantsman was in charge of the vegetation of the garden and of the *penjing* (miniature gardens, also known with the Japanese term *bonsai*). He had to have a very deep knowledge of botanic, but also of the complex world of symbolisms, traditions, meanings, metaphors and references associated with different plant species. Like the craftsman, he had a subordinate role, but it should be noted that a passion for botanic was not considered inappropriate for scholars and artists.

2.3.5 Geomancer

The geomancer was a master of *feng shui*, an ancient discipline that established principles for planning cities and buildings based on a combination of ritual and mysticism on one hand and functional principles on the other. A good geomancer had to have a high degree of education, with knowledge of ancient books on divination and rituals, of topography, geology and climate. He had to determine the right timing for significant actions such as purchasing the land or beginning the construction of the garden, and he had to ensure that the final result would contain a strong flow of *qi*, vital energy. On the practical side, this translated into a garden that followed aesthetic, hygienic and climatic principles.

2.4 DESCRIPTION

After an overview of the context in which the Master of Nets Garden has been created, of its history and its design process, it is now possible to begin the analysis. The first step is a physical description of the space.

Two different approaches will be adopted: first, an explanation of the plan; second, a description of the sequence of spaces that would be encountered by a visitor walking through the garden. They are both necessary, but the latter is especially important, as Chinese classical gardens are designed to be perceived in a dynamic way, by wandering through them. Their purpose is to evade perception of their general plan, and to be enjoyed as a sequence of spaces and scenes.

2.4.1 Location

The Master of Nets Garden is relatively small, with an area of about one acre (0.4 hectares). It is located within the walls of Suzhou, in the southern part of the city. Qian Daxin described its position and surroundings in 1795:

Suzhou is a large town and within its walls the mansions stand closely packed together, as if rubbing shoulders with each other and all but tripping over one another. Only in the south-eastern corner of the town, nestled against the wall and overlooking the river, do the trees grow dense. Here one is struck by the half-rustic air of the place. Just to the south of City Belt Bridge stands the former site of the Hall of the Ten Thousand Fascicles¹ once owned by Master Shi Zhengzhi of the Song, within sight of both South Garden and Surging Waves Pavilion. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 12)

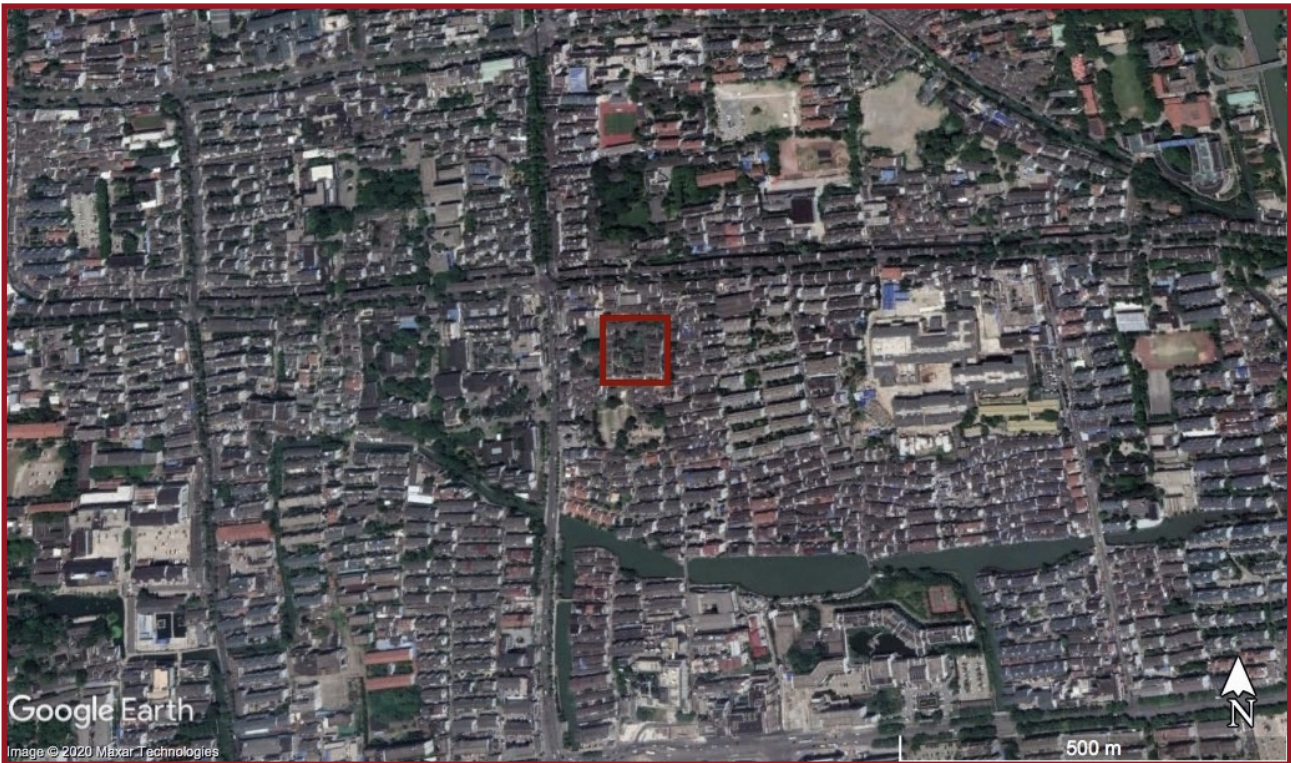
Nowadays, that “half-rustic air” has disappeared, and the garden is surrounded by a densely built urban fabric that has canceled the visual relation with the nearby gardens highlighted in Qian Daxin’s account (fig. 2.4.a).

2.4.2 Plan

The Master of Nets Garden is divided in two sections: the Residential Quarters to the east and the proper garden to the west. The house has a formal layout with a linear sequence of four halls, aligned on a central axis and separated by three courtyards. The main entrance of the complex is located on the southern side of the residence, in a semi-private courtyard that interrupts one of the narrow alleys typical of Suzhou’s urban fabric.

On the western side, the garden shows a much more complex and irregular disposition,

¹ This was one of the names associated in the past with the Master of Nets Garden, as explained in paragraph 2.2.1.



■ Fig. 2.4.a Location of the Master of Nets Garden.

with buildings, hills, corridors and walls organized in courtyard clusters. Masses and voids are intertwined, establishing a close relationship between interior and exterior spaces. As Scottish artist and garden designer Maggie Keswick (1941-1995) wrote,

The whole garden is in a sense a composition of courtyards. Some wind round corners out of sight. Others are half open-ended. Some are cut off like cul-de-sacs, or fit into each other like pieces of a puzzle. The total effect is of a labyrinth, with spaces layered round each other ... (1978, p. 18)

The main section of the garden, right in the middle, is occupied by a lake, almost square in shape, around twenty meters long on each side. In the north-east, a secondary entry gives access to the domestic quarters, while in the north-west is found a secluded courtyard with a study, somehow separated by the rest of the garden. A third entrance, used by servants, is located in the south-eastern corner, giving access to a long and narrow corridor that flanks the house.

Finally, the courtyard in the south-west, known as “Hall of *Paeonia suffruticosa*,” is a later addition strongly criticized by Chen Congzhou, and for the purposes of this research will not be taken into consideration.¹

¹ This approach is consistent with the works of Keswick (1978, p. 17), Johnston (1991, p. 114) and Bedingfeld (1997, p. 21).

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Main Entrance | 11. Cold Spring Kiosk |
| 2. Sedan Hall | 12. Late Spring Annexe |
| 3. Ten Thousand Volumes Hall | 13. Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda |
| 4. Pick Talents Building | 14. One-Slanting-Bamboo-Twig Veranda |
| 5. Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda | 15. Gather Emptiness Study |
| 6. Cloud Ridge | 16. Five Peaks Library |
| 7. Zither Chamber | 17. Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber |
| 8. Tread-Upon-Harmony Lodge | 18. Shoot Ducks Corridor |
| 9. Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion | 19. Rosy Cloud Pool |
| 10. Moon-Reaching-Wind Coming Kiosk | 20. Hall of <i>Paeonia suffruticosa</i> |

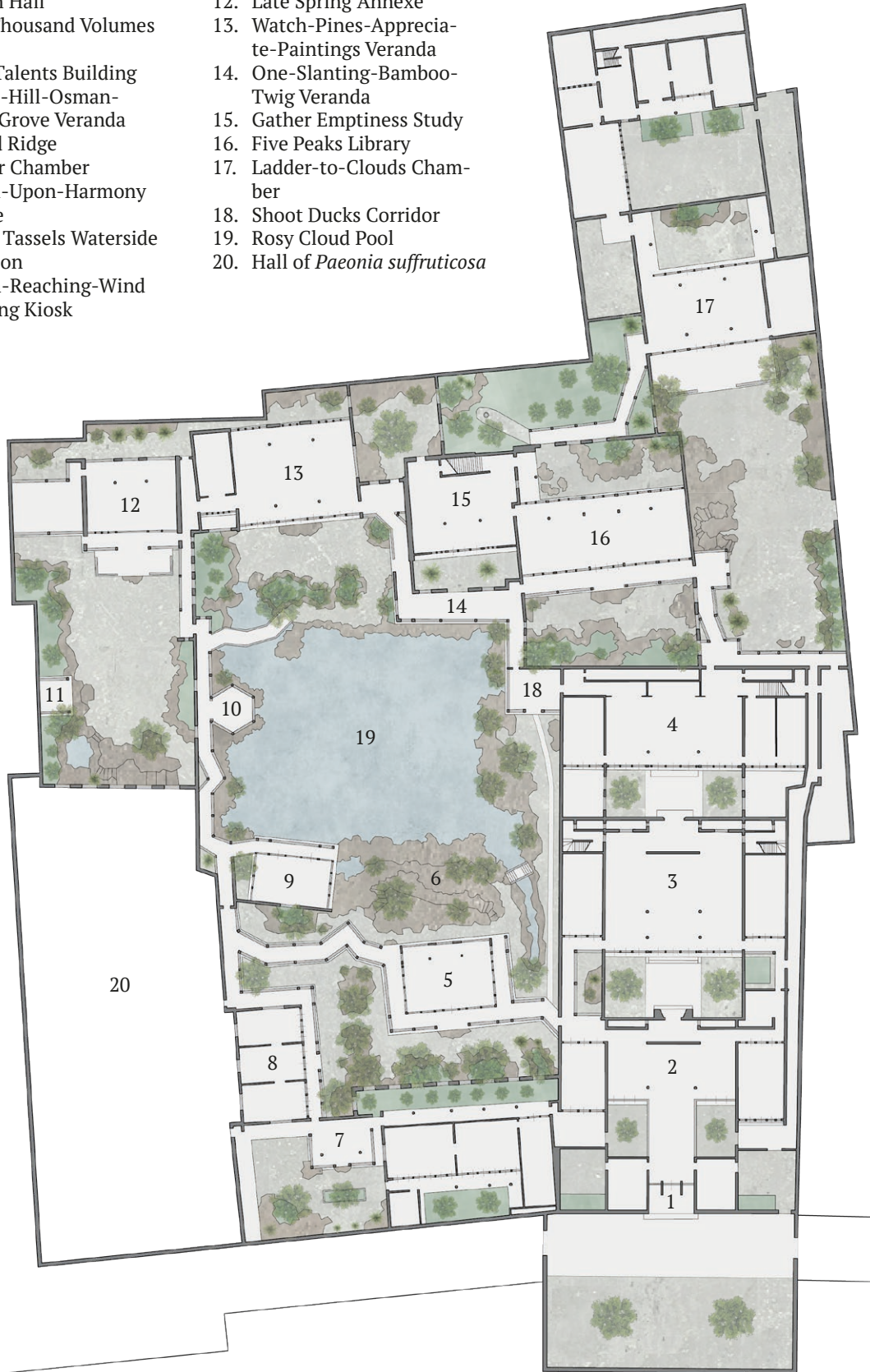
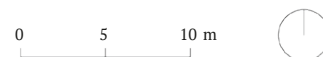


Fig. 2.4.b Plan of the Master of Nets Garden.



2.4.3 Sequence of spaces¹

When creating a garden, designers carefully planned the routes that the visitors would encounter. Walking through a Chinese classical garden is a magical experience in which everything is revealed gradually, arousing feelings of wonder and surprise.

One enters the Master of Nets Garden by leaving the residence through a small door on the western side of the second hall. Above the passage, a carved stone tablet bears the inscription *Wang Shi Xiao Zhu* (“Small House of the Fisherman”). This was the main access to the garden, the one used by visitors and distinguished guests. It leads into a small courtyard decorated by exquisite woodwork screens that frame compositions of rocks, bamboo and shrubs (fig. 2.4.e). Then, the following threshold gives access to a much more complex environment:

The view expands and you have a glimpse of the lake. You can see an arched bridge and the lake stretching away indefinitely, but the view is blocked by a mountain [fig. 2.4.f]. To the left is a rockery, built high with stones jutting sideways in strange shapes, evoking the fantastic landscapes in Chinese paintings [fig. 2.4.g]. The rockery is built against a white wall, its solidity disguised by the intricate patterned openings. It lets light through and it seems the garden must extend further. (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 21)

This part of the garden is described as an “enclosed claustrophobic space with confounding corridors, short focal distance and dense planting that conceals the sky . . . with a mysterious lack of awareness of what lies beyond” (Henderson, 2013, p. 68; fig. 2.4.h).

Ahead lies a semi-transparent pavilion; on the left, a composition of beautiful stones from Lake Tai, bamboo groves and fragrant osmanthus trees. Behind it, a white wall with decorative patterned openings acts as a perfect background. The pavilion is open on all sides, with carved wooden screens that create a delicate play of light and shade and frame, inside a perfect circle, a view of the giant rockery on the left side (fig. 2.4.i).

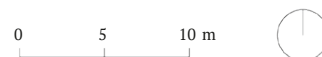
To the left, one can access another small courtyard with a square pavilion that faces an old pomegranate tree in a vase (fig. 2.4.j). Then one can go back and take the zigzag path that departs from the semi-transparent pavilion visited before:

You are sure, now, that you can see beyond the mountain to distant roof tops. Was that another hint of water through a gap in the rocks? We continue, meandering as

¹ In the description of the sequence of spaces of the Master of Nets Garden, this paragraph will roughly follow the route proposed by Bedingfeld (1997, p. 20). According to her, this route has been confirmed to be the main one by Liu Yi, who at the time was the manager of the garden. It is also the logic followed in the descriptions of the Master of Nets Garden given by Johnston (1991, pp. 111-123) and Henderson (2013, pp. 65-77). It should be noted, however, that in Chinese classical gardens there are always several possible routes, and other authors have proposed different alternatives in their descriptions of this garden (see for example Keswick, 1978, pp. 16-28).



■ Fig. 2.4.c Route followed in the description of the sequence of spaces of the Master of Nets Garden.





■ **Fig. 2.4.d** View of the Master of Nets Garden, as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 2.4.e** Small courtyard with rocks, bamboo and shrubs.



■ **Fig. 2.4.f** View with Rosy Cloud Pool and the Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge.



■ **Fig. 2.4.g** Rockery with bamboo and trees in front of the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 2.4.h** Corridors, plants and rocks around the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 2.4.i** The Cloud Ridge seen through a carved wooden screen.



■ Fig. 2.4.j The Zither Chamber and a pomegranate tree in a vase.



■ Fig. 2.4.k Rocks, plants and a trellised window on the back of the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion.



■ Fig. 2.4.l The Rosy Cloud Pool and its compositions of plants, rocks and pavilions.



■ Fig. 2.4.m The Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk.



■ Fig. 2.4.n View of the Rosy Cloud Pool.



■ Fig. 2.4.o Artificial hill with pines in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.

directed by the low walls. To the right is an arrangement of rocks and plants, around a trellised window, and you can see beyond to another decorated screen and, beyond that, much further away it seems, to trees and more pavilions [fig. 2.4.k]. The path leads us in that direction. We pass through the wall, into a dark corridor. The space narrows, and our view is restricted to the endless zigzag corridors ahead. They twist left and right, even up over rocky steps. To the left is a rock and bamboo composition, light flooding down from the above. It distracts you for a split second before the space opens out to the main garden. (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 22)

Finally, the lake. Its surface is covered by lilies, while, under it, goldfish swim. All around, there are plants, rocks and pavilions, arranged in a perfect composition that reflects itself in the calm waters of the lake (fig. 2.4.l). On the right, a rectangular waterside pavilion can be reached. It has a wooden balustrade from which the lake can be admired, while on the opposite side a window frames a view that looks like a Chinese classical painting.

Along the lakeside, a hexagonal pavilion protrudes over the water, supported by stilts hidden among stones (fig. 2.4.m). Its structure seems to float. One can sit here and look at the other side of the lake, where a beautiful composition made of a pavilion, rockery and plants is complemented by the white, undulating wall behind it. At this point, the lake seems very wide (fig. 2.4.n).

On the right, a zigzag bridge lies on the water surface, while the door on the left leads to a secluded courtyard. In its farthest corner, a rockery hides the spring from which the lake originates. Near it, a small square pavilion features a magnificent stone from Lake Tai. Inside the other, bigger, building, oblong windows frame perfectly balanced compositions of rocks, banana trees, bamboo and plum trees.

A series of passages brings to another large hall, open towards the lake. In front of it, an artificial hill with big, ancient pine trees (fig. 2.4.o). At this point,

The path leads us on into a covered corridor. You have a glimpse through a passage into another space and can also see back through a screen into a courtyard . . . You wonder how big the garden must be. Then, looking back to the hexagonal pavilion, you can see a large space behind it, on the other side of the wall. How could you have missed it? And then, you remember the mirror there. You have to check... perhaps the other spaces are only reflections. (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 22)

From the covered corridor on the lake shore, one passes through a mysterious circular opening that leads to a small, quiet courtyard with two bamboo plants. Then there is a study room, followed by a sequence of courtyards and covered walkways, until one finally reaches another large pavilion with finely carved windows on both sides.

On the left, a small enclosed space with stones and a tall magnolia. A door at the end of this small courtyard gives access to a simple white corridor, where the secondary entrance



■ **Fig. 2.4.p** Large courtyard with shrubs, bamboos and trees in front of the Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber.



■ **Fig. 2.4.q** Trees and rocks in front of a wall.



■ **Fig. 2.4.r** Rockery with steps that lead to the upper floor of the Five Peaks Library.



■ **Fig. 2.4.s** Courtyard with shrubs, stones and a scholar tree in front of the Five Peaks Library.



■ **Fig. 2.4.t** The Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge.

of the garden can be found. It is a space that reminds of the narrow, white alleyways that characterize the urban fabric just outside the garden.

On the right side of the pavilion, a terrace leads to a much larger courtyard with shrubs, bamboos, and small trees (fig. 2.4.p). The pavement is made of cobblestones decorated with a pattern of stylized flowers that merge with the grey stones at the base of the walls. In this garden, perception of space is constantly manipulated in a masterful way:

Indeed, the designer has made several subtle changes which increase the illusion of space; the long east wall, for example, is half-concealed behind trees and here is painted not white but grey, a soft, dark, cloudy grey which disappears like a misty shadow in the early light [fig. 2.4.q]. There seems to be no wall at all, only a haze; and yet the area is ambiguous because the wall has a round doorway in it, promising more courtyards beyond. (Keswick, 1978, p. 18)

On one side of the courtyard, a pile of rocks that seems a “solidified cloud formation” (Keswick, 1978, p. 20) with an intricate pattern of masses and voids, hides a series of steps that lead to a small door on the upper floor of a two-story building (fig. 2.4.r). From the balcony, a view of the lake can be enjoyed. But the two floors are not connected by an interior staircase, so one has to get down and proceed to another courtyard in order to enter the ground floor of the building. Here, a peaceful arrangement of shrubs and stones, with a scholar tree in the corner, can be admired (fig. 2.4.s). It looks like the tree has been placed there to draw attention to the top of the pointed roof of a pavilion located beyond the wall:

Such glimpses keep us moving on through a Chinese garden. It is as if the designer were constantly holding back, enclosing each view, yet always suggesting new delights just beyond the further wall. (Keswick, 1978, p. 20)

By following this suggestion, one gets back at the lake, on the opposite side:

Now it is the hexagonal pavilion that is part of a visual composition that seemed flat, almost a painting, before has become the space in which we stand. It is a grand view, the pavilion central and undulating, covered corridors asymmetrical on either side . . . It is only now, though, that the full effect of this mirror becomes apparent. There, in the center of the composition, the mirror doubles the size of the garden. (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 23)

An intricate rockery with openings gives small framed views of the lake. Finally, one reaches the bridge that was first noticed upon entering the garden. From far away, it looked much larger than it actually is (fig. 2.4.t). A few steps more, and one reaches again the starting point, and “at the end the visitor will have no more idea of the plan of the garden than he did when he started” (Keswick, 1978, p. 23).

2.5 ELEMENTS

As for every Chinese classical garden, the design of Master of Nets Garden is based on four main elements: rocks, water, plants and buildings. After a brief introduction, each will be analyzed, laying out its role in the composition of the garden, both from a functional and an aesthetic point of view.

Rocks and water are the primary elements of a Chinese classical garden, the main framework that gives shape to it. The combination of these two elements is rich of symbolisms and mythical associations: it evokes the Isles of the Immortals; it represents the skeleton (rocks) and blood (water) of the Earth; it is a representation of the *yin-yang* dialectic, with rocks being the solid, masculine principle and water being the fluid, feminine one. When a hill is created in a garden, a hollow has to be excavated, a hollow that can be filled with water. Mountain and lake are complementary: in fact, “digging ponds and piling mountains” was a common Chinese expression that meant “making a garden.”

The third element is vegetation. By making visible the season cycle, it introduces the dimension of time in the garden.

Finally, architecture. Halls and pavilions establish the human presence in Nature and the role of the individual who, thanks to his imagination and creativity, can give meaning to the landscape.

All these elements are arranged in a perfectly balanced and harmonious composition: they are like

music notes in a grand musical piece of work. On the one hand, each note has its own position and role; on the other hand, it is a specific link constituting the artistic effect of the entire piece with constant flow and changes. (Yi Wang, 2015, p. 37)

In this symphony, the whole is much more than a mere sum of the parts. Rocks, water, plants and buildings establish a network of interactions, often so subtle that it may go unnoticed by the casual observer:

The delights of a garden lie in the freshness that rises from a stream in the summer heat; in the distant sound of a fish leaping in the evening mist; in the scent of lotus and the transforming power of snow. But in particular they lie in that peculiarly Chinese fascination for paradox – for moments when the buzz of a cicada (as one saying goes) heighten the silence, or a rustling breeze make the stillness more intense. By immersing himself in these transient but often-repeated effects, the garden-maker grew in awareness of the Tao’s [Dao’s] eternal transformations and, in the acute perception of the passing moment, himself transcended time. (Keswick, 1978, p. 188)

2.5.1 Rocks

In ancient times, mountains were worshipped as magical entities, imbued with supernatural powers. They were a symbol of the immense power of Nature, and were thought to be the origin of clouds, thus being responsible for the fertility of the land. According to the myths, the Immortals lived in the mountains, and by reproducing them in a garden, one could hope, by sympathetic magic, to attain somehow their immortality. The Chinese venerated five mountains in particular, that were considered holy and represented the center of the world and its four corners.

It was during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) that terraces made of rammed earth and structures similar to artificial mountains made their appearance in imperial gardens. In the following centuries, it became popular to recreate in gardens famous mountain landscapes in miniature. By reading the description of the garden of Zhang Lun, who was minister of agriculture during the 6th century, one can get an idea of the role of rocks at the time:

He built up a mountain called Ching-yang as if it were a work of Nature, with piled-up peaks and multiple ranges rising in steep succession, with deep ravines and caverns and gullies tortuously linked. So lofty were the forests, so gigantic the trees that the sun and moon could not penetrate their shadowed obscurity; so luxuriant were the vines and creepers in their festooning as to control the passage of wind and mist. Here the [Daoist] adepts, the lovers of mountains and wilderness, might have roamed until they forgot to return to their heaven . . . (as cited in Keswick, 1978, p. 155)

By the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), rock appreciation was no longer only a religious activity, but also an aesthetic one. It had become a sophisticated field worthy of being studied by scholars, who became great connoisseurs and collectors of stones. Many “catalogues of stones” started to be published, as “petromania” became widespread. One of the best-known examples is the *Catalogue Cloudy Forest*, written by Tu Wan in 1125. It contained drawings, engravings and scholarly comments about 116 kinds of stones, categorized according to their qualities, including their medicinal properties and the sound they produced when struck.

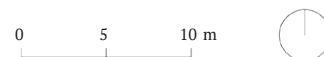
Among the most popular rocks, there were those coming from Lake Tai. Tu Wan gives us a precise description of these stones:

Huge specimens, up to fifty feet high, with a color range from white through pale blue to blue-black, their surfaces textured in net-like relief, are hauled out of the lake. The most desirable have tortuous, rugged contours, and abundant hollows. Small surface cavities are called “arbalest pellet nests.” (as cited in Keswick, 1978, p. 161)

1. Cloud Ridge
2. Rock mountain on the eastern side of the Five Peaks Library
3. Cold Spring Kiosk



■ Fig. 2.5.a Rocks in the Master of Nets Garden.



The cavities that made them so renowned were created by small, hard pebbles that, pushed by the strength of the waves, hit the porous limestone of which the rocks were made. Stones with bigger holes were viewed as more valuable and delicate, as the risk of them getting broken was higher. Besides, rocks that showed the signs of erosion by wind and water were valued because they evoked the unrelenting passage of time.

According to Tu Wan, rocks from Lake Tai belonged to the category of “baroque” stones, having weird, singular shapes. The other category was that of “primitive” stones, characterized by the mimetic qualities that made them look like mountains, clouds, animals or mythological beings. In order to achieve the perfect shape and color, scholars modified, dyed and smoked their stones. Human intervention was accepted, as long as the final result looked “naturalistic.”

In a Chinese classical garden, rocks, like every other element, have two roles: aesthetic and functional.

Rocks are aesthetically appreciated both because of their association to wild mountain landscapes inhabited by hermits and of their elegant shape, comparable to an abstract 20th century sculpture like the ones made by Jean Arp or Henry Moore. By contemplating a stone, a Chinese mind

would easily imagine being perched on a mountain wilderness, confronted by elemental forces. The experience is not calming – that effect is properly left to water – but confusing and unnerving. (Keswick, 1978, 158)

These feelings are part of a complex balance to which all the elements of the garden contribute, creating a general sense of peace.

On the other hand, the practical function of rocks, which is inseparable from the aesthetic one, is to organize and structure the layout of the garden, creating scenes and spatial sequences. This is achieved by using their volume, shape and shadows.

In a garden, rocks can take two main forms: false mountains and sculptural rocks. The Master of Nets Garden features examples of both typologies.

False mountains (*jia shan*) are clusters of rocks that look like mountains when seen from afar. They arouse in the visitor a variety of emotions: the impression that beyond them there are unlimited views, so that the garden does not feel enclosed, and the curiosity and wonder of exploration as, just like real mountains, they have paths, caves and grottoes.

False mountains can be made of clay, stones or both. The most common type is the mixed one, as it allows plants to grow in flatter places while maintaining a powerful image of wilderness. By using lake stones or yellow stones, mountains can look either more delicate or



■ Fig. 2.5.b The Cloud Ridge.



■ Fig. 2.5.c Detail of the Cloud Ridge.



■ Fig. 2.5.d A grotto in the Cloud Ridge.



■ Fig. 2.5.e Rock mountain on the eastern side of the Five Peaks Library.



■ Fig. 2.5.f A sculptural stone from Lake Tai, positioned in front of a white wall.



■ Fig. 2.5.g A sculptural stone from Lake Tai, positioned in the Cold Spring Kiosk.



■ Fig. 2.5.h Rockeries on the shore of the Rosy Cloud Pool.

more majestic.

The creation of a false mountain can be compared to the construction of a building. First, foundations capable of sustaining the weight of the rockery have to be laid out. This is usually achieved by digging tree trunks into the ground. On this base are placed stones with regular shapes and smooth surfaces. Finally, irregular stones, clay and plants are added.

In their composition, false mountains should look natural: rocks should not be positioned in rows or regular, symmetric patterns. There must be gullies, paths, caves. The summit should feature stones that form peaks or crests, thus creating fantastic landscapes or reminding of existing geological formations. In mixed mountains, stones should be scattered among the earth and the vegetation, and plants should be controlled in growth so that their scale is appropriate. Writer Li Liweng (1610-1680) insists that the general composition of a rockery is more important than the aspect of the single element: according to him, building a mountain can be compared to writing an essay. He also praises mixed mountains for being a synthesis of nature and art (Keswick, 1978, p. 159).

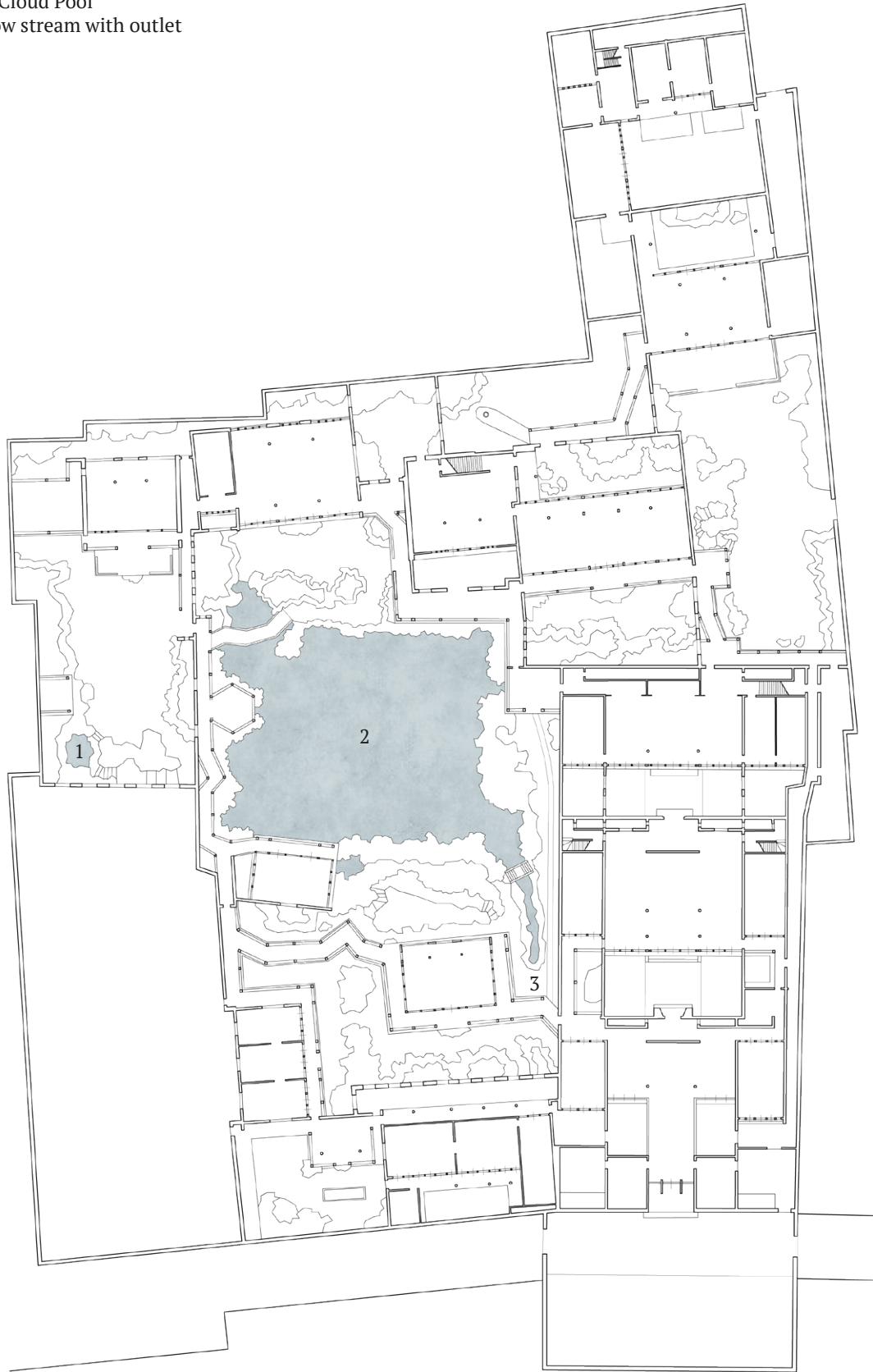
As to their placement in the garden, false mountains should not occupy a central position, because in that case their powerful presence, energy and visual importance would dominate the entire space.

In the Master of Nets Garden there are two interesting examples of false mountains: the Cloud Ridge, a mixed mountain made of yellow stone, earth and vegetation, located near the central area of the garden, just south of the Rosy Cloud Pool (figs. 2.5.b-d); and a rock mountain made of lake stone, located on the eastern side of the Five Peaks Library, whose staircase it conceals (fig. 2.5.e).

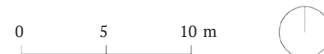
Sculptural rocks, on the other hand, are single stones especially elegant or simple compositions of such stones that exalt the qualities of each individual piece. These rocks are considered abstractions of mountains. In their composition, the relation between each stone is carefully considered. “Feminine” stones, more delicate, are balanced by rough, “masculine” ones.

Sculptural rocks were sometimes placed right on the ground, while in other cases they were put on a pedestal, sometimes even a decorated one. The *Yuan Ye* suggests positioning a rock with the heavier, broader part at the top and the narrower, thinner one at the base, so that the stone seems to float. Sculptural rocks can be positioned in the middle of a small courtyard or against a white wall, thus eliminating visual interferences and allowing a full appreciation of their qualities (fig. 2.5.f). Sculptural stones can be combined with vegetation (for example, according to the *Yuan Ye*, they can be placed under a pine or near flowers) or positioned next to a building, thus creating a contrast between natural and artificial

1. Jade-Containing Spring
2. Rosy Cloud Pool
3. Narrow stream with outlet point



■ Fig. 2.5.i Water in the Master of Nets Garden.



elements. Sometimes, entire pavilions were especially built with the purpose of creating a space dedicated to the contemplation of a single, particularly beautiful rock: an example is the Cold Spring Kiosk in the Master of Nets Garden (2.5.g).

Moreover, rocks play also other roles in Chinese classical gardens. For example, they can serve as shores of ponds and streams, providing a miniature model of coastlines, with inlets, bays, promontories (2.5.h). The combination of water and rocks, quite common in the natural environment, generates highly evocative scenes.

2.5.2 Water

Water is a crucial element in the delicate balance of a Chinese classical garden. As Song Dynasty scholar and garden designer Shao Yang (1011-1077) said, “garden pavilions are alive with water” (as cited in Yi Wang, 2015, p. 41). This element is not only beautiful, but also necessary in order to counterbalance mountains, thus representing the perfect harmony of Nature. This is further demonstrated by the fact that, in the *Yuan Ye*, pools, creeks and waterfalls are described in the same chapter dedicated to hill making.

Water has always been a defining trait of Chinese topography, agriculture and transport. In ancient times, the life of the Chinese depended on the yearly rain cycle. The omnipresent rice paddies required complex hydraulic systems, that allowed them not only to feed the population, but also to become one of the most beautiful landscapes ever created.

For these reasons, it is not surprising that water plays a vital role in gardens. Besides, for the Chinese this element has a deep spiritual meaning, being an important Daoist symbol. In fact, the classic text of the *Dao De Jing*, written by Lao Zi around the 6th - 4th century BCE, reads:

The highest virtue is like water –
Water’s virtue benefits the ten thousand creatures, yet it does not strive.
It dwells in places that everyone detests,
Therefore it is almost comparable to Dao! (2015, ch. 8)

According to the *Zhuangzi*, another classic text of Daoism, written by Zhuangzi around the 3rd century BCE, Confucius (551-479 BCE) praised water too when he said:

Nothing is so level as water at rest, and it can serve as a model for man: preserve what is within and let nothing outside stir you. Virtue is the cultivation of complete harmony, and the person of virtue beyond outward show is one who is never separated from the world of things.. (2019, ch. 5)

A long tradition of myths, legends and poems enriched the metaphorical images associ-



■ **Fig. 2.5.j** The Jade-Containing Spring, half-hidden by a large rockery.



■ **Fig. 2.5.k** The Rosy Cloud Pool, in the middle of the garden.



■ **Fig. 2.5.l** The narrow stream that constitutes the outlet of the garden's water system.



■ **Fig. 2.5.m** Water and rocks: the Rosy Cloud Pool and the Cloud Ridge.



■ **Fig. 2.5.n** Visitors of the garden enjoying water.



■ **Fig. 2.5.o** Reflections.



■ **Fig. 2.5.p** Water and plants: water lilies.

ated with water, creating several layers of meanings. Therefore, in Chinese culture, water represents

the ultimate essence, the blood of the earth, the undistorting mirror, the Immortals' drink, the place for mermaids, and woman's essence, which was summarised in the moon and crystallised in a pearl. Water had the power to conjure up all these related associations for a garden visitor inclined to receive them, and such a chain of ideas would often play a role, even if only sometimes a subconscious role, in the design and appreciation of gardens. (Keswick, 1978, p. 172).

In a Chinese classical garden, water should look natural. Instead of having regular shapes, it should resemble lakes, streams, waterfalls. The shores of ponds should be irregular and sinuous, with inlets, bays, promontories. Fountains are rare, as they force water to behave against its nature.

Both moving and still water appear in gardens. The former is appreciated because of the sound it produces and the association with the streams in the mountains where hermits used to live, but the latter plays a more important role, representing the *yin* aspect of water that balances the *yang* of mountains. In any case, however, the water system of the garden as a whole should appear to be flowing from a source to an outlet. Just like blood flows in the human body, giving life, water flows through the garden and makes the space alive. Therefore, there is usually a spring in every garden. In the Master of Nets Garden, the Jade-Containing Spring is located near the Cold Spring Kiosk, half-hidden by a large rockery (fig. 2.5.j). Water then passes below a wall and a gallery and flows into the Rosy Cloud Pool, in the middle of the garden (fig. 2.5.k). A narrow stream, almost a gully, characterized by a small bridge, represents the outlet point (fig. 2.5.l).

If movement is a crucial feature for water in a garden, cleanness and transparency, on the other hand, are not considered important. Instead, the Chinese can appreciate opaque and milky water, described as "pearl-like," and green water, praised for being "cloudy like jade."

The aesthetic role of water in the garden consists in conveying a sense of spaciousness, dynamism and vitality to the place, in producing pleasing sounds and in creating a contrast between quietness and dynamism. What is important is not its depth, but its surface appearance and shape. A body of water should look like it has no end, suggesting more spaces and scenes beyond what can be seen in a certain moment.

Water has also important functional roles: it is used to control temperature and humidity in the garden and to irrigate the vegetation, while being also an insurance against fire.

Besides, it contributes to organizing and structuring scenes and space sequences. In fact, it often represents the heart of the garden, both spatially and metaphorically, with court-



■ Fig. 2.5.q Plants in the Master of Nets Garden.



yards and pavilions arranged around it. It establishes close relationships with all the other elements of the garden.

The most important of these relationships is the one with rocks. Mountains and lakes are the main framework of the garden – and of the Chinese conception of landscape in general (fig. 2.5.m). There should be a close connection of reflection, contrast and transition between water and rocks: according to Wang Yi, this “is usually the key to success of garden creation” (2015, p. 44).

The relation between water and buildings is based on reflection. Pavilions should be reflected in their entirety, so that the water doubles the size of the space (fig. 2.5.o). Therefore, proportions of the elements near water should be carefully calculated, and, if a structure is too big, it should be set back from the shore. Pavilions allow the visitor to be surrounded by water, sitting in comfort and contemplating its stillness, disturbed only by the movement of fish. The railings of the seats often have a curved shape that intensify the experience, making the visitor even more aware of his relationship with water.

Water plants can be usually found in the lakes. They contribute to giving liveliness to it, but they should not fill the entire space, because in that case they would hide the reflections of the surrounding buildings (fig. 2.5.p).

The result of this complexity is described by Wang Yi:

Literati gardens of the Southeast are known to be excellent examples of rich and varied, ingenious and delicate waterscapes . . . arranged in a patchwork of various mountain rocks, flowers, plants, and architecture, creating in particular a complicated artistic effect and spatial relationship of contrast, spacing, echo, communication, avoidance, supporting or opposing between all these landscapes. (2015, p. 43)

2.5.3 Plants

Plants have always played a central role in Chinese culture. In the course of the centuries, they have acquired layers over layers of meanings, symbolisms and associations, becoming the protagonists of countless paintings, poetries and, of course, gardens. According to French geographer Pierre Gourou (1900-1999), in fact, China is “the botanical civilization” (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 164). Maggie Keswick explains that

The love of flowers is an ancient passion among the Chinese, and this is hardly surprising; among all the flowery regions of the world it would be hard to find one to match China in the richness and diversity of its natural flora. (1978, p. 174)

This incredible variety allowed China to be one of the cradles of horticulture in the world. Gardening techniques became more and more sophisticated: at the time of the Song Dy-

nasty (960-1279), it was possible to go beyond geographical and seasonal restrictions, for example extending flowering periods of certain species. A vast literature centered on plants appeared: lists that reported medicinal and culinary uses; monographs to illustrate cultivation techniques; bizarre eulogies that aimed at demonstrating that a certain species was superior to the others; poetries that enriched the symbolic meanings of plants.

In a Chinese classical garden, plants played first of all a functional role. Especially before the time of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), they were grown primarily for an economic purpose. Gardens were not only places of aesthetic contemplation, but also of agricultural production.

Besides, several species had very important medicinal uses. According to Maggie Keswick, it may have been this very trait that first sparked the association of plants with spiritual meanings:

Magic was an important element in the ancient Chinese attitude towards plants and trees, and it became associated with particular kinds of flora either because they were medicinally useful or because they were uncommon. Holiness and medicinal value became inextricably linked, and this combination of powers perhaps also stirred the aesthetic faculties of herb-gatherers: a medicinal leaf, which was therefore a holy leaf, began also to be thought of as beautiful. (1978, p. 180)

Therefore, as for the other elements of the garden, also in the plants the functional and the aesthetic aspects are deeply connected. Appreciation of trees and flowers derives from both their physical appearance (shape, dimension, color, texture, scent, acoustic properties) and symbolic meanings. The importance of the latter cannot be stressed enough: in fact, “symbolism was not an afterthought, but rather a primary emotional element of the garden form” (Morris, 1983, p. 164). Maggie Keswick argues that plants were not merely illustrations of moral principles, but rather the source of ethical ideas: it was the very forms of nature that inspired Chinese thinkers. This concept is expressed, for example, in the words of Qing Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799):

When I find pleasure in orchids I love uprightness; when I see pines and bamboos I think of virtue; when I stand beside limpid brooks I value honesty; when I see weeds I despise dishonesty. That is what is meant by the proverb, “the Ancients get their idea from objects.” (as cited in Keswick, 1978, p. 176)

Each plant had its own meaning, connected through an intricate web to traditional festivals, cuisine, medicine, everyday life, calligraphy, mythology, painting, literature and, of course, garden design. As Edwin T. Morris said, “to the Chinese, each flower or plant was an ideogram, a character of an unspoken but well-understood language” (1983, p. 165).

In the composition of the garden, plants could, in different circumstances, be the protagonists of a scene or playing a supporting, decorative role. When creating a garden, a great care was placed in preserving the existing vegetation and enhancing its characteristics in the new design. The rest of the floral elements were planted only after rocks, water and buildings were in place, in order to give to each space a special character.

As rocks and water, plants should have a natural aspect. Therefore, trimmed hedges, geometrical patterns and topiary are out of question. The vegetation of the garden is cut and pruned to enhance its beauty and create a harmonious composition with the surrounding rocks, water and buildings.

There are some general principles that should be followed in the arrangement of plants. A good composition should be based on the juxtaposition of different shapes and colors (fig. 2.5.r). A big tree can be the main element in a large courtyard, giving unity to the composition. Smaller spaces can be managed with a group of smaller plants combined with elegant rocks (fig. 2.5.s). Flowers of bright colors should stay in front of white walls, while those with tenuous shades should be planted near green shrubs or in open spaces. In small gardens, they are better protected by a fence. Specimens with outstandingly sculptural trunks or particularly beautiful shapes should have a prominent position. In mixed planting, deciduous tree should be the dominant element, supported by evergreen plants and bamboos (fig. 2.5.t). The composition should highlight the contrast between sparse and dense foliage, light and dark color, avoiding monotony (fig. 2.5.u).

Seasonality is a key factor: in a Chinese classical garden, plants are meant to make visible the flow of time, the cycles of Nature and the cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang*. The composition of the garden has to highlight the differences between the four seasons while always remaining harmonious. Festivals mark the most important moments of the year, each of them associated with a certain plant, that is celebrated for the occasion. Therefore, plants in the garden celebrate change: “the growing trees and flowers are more like clothing, sometimes enhancing, sometimes obscuring, and sometimes totally altering the effect of the forms beneath” (Keswick, 1978, p. 184).

Chinese classical gardens feature all kinds of plants:

- Conifers, with needles that remain green during the whole year, representing therefore tenacity and longevity (fig. 2.5.v);
- Green herbaceous plants (mainly bamboo and banana), with a dramatic foliage that contributes to the garden in all seasons and creates interesting effects when the weather is rainy or windy (fig. 2.5.w);
- Broad-leafed evergreens, that often bear beautiful flowers whose blooming signals



■ **Fig. 2.5.r** Composition of plants in front of the Shoot Ducks Corridor.



■ **Fig. 2.5.s** Composition of plants and rocks in a small courtyard.



■ **Fig. 2.5.t** Composition of plants with a deciduous tree as the dominant element.



■ **Fig. 2.5.u** Composition of plants as seen from a window of the Late Spring Annexe.



■ **Fig. 2.5.v** A lacebark pine.



■ **Fig. 2.5.w** A clump of bamboo.



■ **Fig. 2.5.x** A Japanese maple.



■ **Fig. 2.5.y** A holly tree.

the arrival of spring;

- Flowers, that are not planted in masses but in ways that make it possible to fully appreciate their deep significance;
- Deciduous trees, often planted in large spaces, displaying the cycle of seasons (fig. 2.5.x);
- Fruit trees, that are not only practical, but also a source of color (fig. 2.5.y);
- Climbing plants, grown on rocks or walls, as well as on pergolas and even around tree trunks;
- Potted plants and *penjing*, used to decorate both interior and exterior spaces.

The role of plants in the Master of Nets Garden and their symbolic meanings and associations will be further discussed in chapter 3.

2.5.4 Buildings

According to the *Yuan Ye*, “the most important element in the layout of gardens is the siting of the principal buildings” (as cited in Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 16). Architectures are an essential part of Chinese classical gardens, creating places that allow to enjoy a view while at the same time being part of another view. Buildings represent the role of Humankind as an integrated part of Nature. Without them, there would be no garden, just wilderness:

The simple presence of a pavilion . . . effects one of the most fundamental transformations in the garden. “Once a place has a *ting* [pavilion],” the saying goes, “we can call it a garden.” A piece of architecture domesticates a wilderness or, as the Chinese say, “borrows” the landscape, creating both the frame and the focus it lacked before. (Keswick, 1978, p. 119)

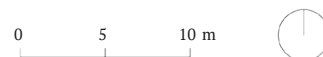
But, even when a garden is very densely built (as is the case in the Master of Nets Garden), architectures never appear to dominate the whole composition:

The ideal was to arrange pavilions and pagodas as they were used in landscape painting: in a scroll, one senses the vastness of the rocks and waters, but the small human touches show that it is equally a topography of man. (Morris, 1983, p. 91)

Chinese classical architecture is usually made of wooden structures. The prominence of this material has two reasons: the first is that the Chinese civilization was born in an area where wood was much more available than stone, that is the loess valley of the Yellow River; the second is that, in Chinese society, being part of a clan was a fundamental value, so there was no need for the giant, monumental stone structures that characterized many other civilizations around the world.



■ Fig. 2.5.z Buildings in the Master of Nets Garden.



Chinese architecture has been based for centuries on the same basic patterns, displaying an incredible continuity through the course of history. Construction was highly standardized and based on an anthropometric module determined by the central government. Because of this, Chinese traditional buildings were well proportionate and respected the human scale, while at the same time having a flexibility that allowed them to assume various configurations and to be disassembled and reused. This was particularly good for garden design, where it was possible to create a variegated array of different forms and spaces depending on the desired function and aesthetics. While structures and modules remained extremely simple, the resulting spatial configuration could achieve incredible levels of originality and complexity: the garden is “a place where the ordinary is transformed into something new and delightful” (Keswick, 1978, p. 117).

The first step to construct a building was to create its foundations. After ramming the earth on which the structure would stand, three layers were laid: compacted rubble, a second layer of rammed earth, and finally flagstones. On this base were positioned the stone bases for the pillars. Then, on top of these bases were placed wooden plinths, on which were raised the pillars.

The weight of the building was brought exclusively by pillars, with walls being non-supportive, or sometimes non-existent at all (fig. 2.5.aa). Wooden sills and lintels connected respectively the bases and tops of the pillars, reinforcing the structure.

In order to effectively bear the enormous weight of Chinese roofs, pillars were assisted by a system of brackets, that supported horizontal loads. This system was formed by a complex disposition of arms and stiffeners that were mortised and tenoned without using any nails. The brackets were not concealed, but rather left clearly visible, so that their geometrical pattern could enhance the beauty of the architecture.

The roof was a crucial expressive in Chinese classical architecture:

Some roofs are so disproportionately large that the sheltered enclosure below seems a mere afterthought, an excuse to display the gentle – yet at the same time awesome and powerful – rush to the sky. (Keswick, 1978, p. 123)

A series of beams of different lengths supported the purlins, on which was positioned the wood planking that bore the tiles (fig. 2.5.ab). The cross-section of the roof is not simply a triangle, but “the rafters . . . are broken into many short sections that seem to cascade over the purlins like a long, gently breaking wave” (Morris, 1983, p. 194). The roof extends beyond the outer line of pillars and ends with a final curve. In every corner, the rafters “are splayed out like the ribs of a fan and then raised by a support system known as ‘spears upon spears’,



■ Fig. 2.5.aa Wooden pillars in the Gather Emptiness Study.



■ Fig. 2.5.ab The structure of the roof of the Zither Chamber.



■ Fig. 2.5.ac A flared corner in the roof of the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion.



■ Fig. 2.5.ad Detail of the finials positioned at the end of the rows of tiles.



■ Fig. 2.5.ae Steps at the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall.



■ Fig. 2.5.af Natural stone at the Zither Chamber.



■ Fig. 2.5.ag Terrace at the Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber.

which gives the characteristically flared corners of the Chinese roof” (Morris, 1983, p. 194; fig. 2.5.ac). These flying eaves were especially exuberant in Suzhou and in the Yangzi valley. They not only played an aesthetic role, but had also an essential structural function, evenly distributing the weight of the roof onto the pillars and therefore reducing the torque. Their tips were usually decorated with small terra-cotta sculptures that represented animals. The ends of the ridgepole featured similar ornaments as well.

The roof structure could be declined in five different styles, allowing the creation of roofs with no central spine or even round roofs. The ceramic tiles were attached to the wood planking with mortar, fitted in an alternating concave and convex pattern. In Suzhou, their color was usually a dark steely gray. At the end of each row, there was a finial that drew the rain away, making it drip to the ground and thus creating interesting acoustic effects (fig. 2.5.ad). It was usually decorated with the character that means “longevity” or with representations of bats, a symbol of happiness.

In the composition of the building, the roof had an ambiguous role, being “partly a light handkerchief hovering miraculously over shadowed columns and brackets, partly a unifying mass which caps and dominates all other elements” (Keswick, 1978, p. 123).

The weight of the roof was enormous, reaching as much as 400 kilograms per square meter. The reason for this is that it had to withstand extremely strong winds. Besides that, Chinese buildings also had to resist earthquakes. This was achieved by breaking the vertical load-bearing structure in three elements – stone base, plinth, pillar – and by having such a complex bracket system. Moreover, one of the most widely used woods for architectural structures was white fir (*Cupressus funebris*), that has an extremely high tensile strength (around four times that of steel) and resistance to compression (around six times that of concrete).

The construction system described bears important implications for the spatiality of the resulting architecture, allowing the creation of large interior spaces free of supporting walls and permitting a great degree of flexibility on the building envelope. Doors and windows could be created anywhere, according to functional and aesthetic needs, and walls could even be completely removed. Such extremely permeable architectures allow cross-ventilation during summer, while the overhanging roofs provide shade.

Buildings in Chinese classical gardens can establish different kinds of relationships with the ground. The main structures had to be elevated off the ground, while less important pavilions were flush to it. The access to residential halls is granted by regular, rectangular stone steps (fig. 2.5.ae), while buildings in the middle of the garden feature natural stones that create a gradual transition between the “natural” outside and the “artificial” inside (fig.

2.5.af). Large buildings, instead, could have a whole terrace in front of them, from which the inhabitants of the garden could contemplate natural elements (fig. 2.5.ag).

Chinese classical buildings had other distinctive features. Their windows were not made of glass but paper, whose translucent properties allowed light to flow inside. Heating was provided by braziers (there were no fireplaces and chimneys). Stairs were often external, hidden in rockery piles.

After having described an individual structure, it is necessary to analyze how several buildings were assembled. In Chinese architecture, the basic form is the courtyard. In it, every construction is independent yet at the same time related to the other ones. While in residential complexes the sequence of courtyards is orderly and regular, revealing a formal, Confucian hierarchy, in gardens it features a great irregularity and flexibility that expresses a Daoist, organic ideal. As written in the *Yuan Ye*,

Buildings in gardens are different from ordinary dwelling-houses, for they must have order in variety and yet their orderliness must not be too rigid: even this orderliness should have a pleasing unpredictability, and yet at their most diverse there should be an underlying consistency. (as cited in Missingham, 2001, p. 30)

The composition of the plan of the garden is thus extremely flexible: “there is no set formula for pavilions, nor any rule for their layout” (as cited in Missingham, 2001, p. 31). The traditional importance attributed to orientation should be balanced by other considerations, concerning especially the views that one could have from buildings: “the primary consideration is the view, and it is all better if the buildings can also face south” (as cited in Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 16). Garden architectures follow topography, landscape, function, and a general “logic of surprise” (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 118).

In order to ensure a good ventilation and illumination of interior spaces, buildings should be open both on the front and the back (that means, usually, on their southern and northern sides). This should be granted even when an architecture is located near to the boundary wall of the garden: at least a small courtyard is always left between a pavilion and the wall.

In a Chinese classical garden, architecture is playful and, most importantly, has a deep metaphorical dimension. Every element is much more than what it appears to be, with deep layers of meanings. So, for example,

Holes through a wall can be circular “moon gates,” while sometimes they are in the shape of flowers, shells, gourds or vases. Balustrades can take the pattern of “cracked ice,” pathways can become “geese” and “meander like playing cats,” pavilions over the water can become “boats,” and five pavilions set together become “the claws of the Imperial five-toed dragon.” (Keswick, 1978, p. 118)

Architectures in the garden should, of course, establish a harmonious relationship with Nature. For this reason, they do not usually feature bright colors: tiles and bricks are grey, beams and pillars are brown, walls are white. Wooden elements exhibit their natural texture. Buildings “blend humbly into Nature” (Yu & Wei, 2010, p. 8). The natural qualities of the materials are displayed, highlighted and valued as a part of the beauty of the garden:

... there are two rules to follow. Simple is better than complicated. Natural is better than mechanical. These are general rules that simple could be lasting for a long time while complicated could not, and following the nature of the materials would be firm otherwise not. Using the wood as material should follow the wood’s nature by mortise and tenon joints. (Shi & Zhao, 2012, p. 9)

Unity between buildings and Nature is also achieved by opening up their envelope and emptying their interior space. Architecture is dematerialized, becoming transparent, losing its tectonic component, completely blending with the garden and encouraging inhabitants to live both in the interior as well as in the exterior space.

Chinese classical garden featured a wide array of typologies of buildings, all based on the same beam-framing structural system and on the same five basic roof forms. Some examples of typologies that appear in the Master of Nets Garden are:

- *Gé* (阁, “pavilion”), a pavilion that offers a beautiful view (e.g. the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion);
- *Láng* (廊, “corridor”), a porch or covered passage (e.g. the Shoot Ducks Corridor);
- *Lóu* (楼, “building”), a large building or tower with multiple floors (e.g. the Pick Talents Building);
- *Shūwū* (书屋, “library”), a room for studying (e.g. the Five Peaks Library);
- *Táng* (堂, “hall”), the main room of a house, or a large building placed in a prominent position and used to receive guests (e.g. the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall);
- *Tíng* (庭, “hall”), a reception hall (e.g. the Sedan Hall);
- *Tíng* (亭, “pavilion” or “kiosk”), a small structure open on all sides, where one can rest and enjoy a beautiful view (e.g. the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk);
- *Xuān* (轩, “veranda”), a medium-sized structure with large windows, generally used for painting or studying, but also for receiving guests (e.g. the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda, the Small-Hill-OSmanthus-Grove Veranda, and the One-Slanting-Bamboo-Twig Veranda);
- *Yí* (籓, “annexe”), a small house connected to a larger one (e.g. the Late Spring Annexe);
- *Zhāi* (斋, “study”), a study room (e.g. the Gather Emptiness Study).

2.6 SPACE AND MOVEMENT

In a Chinese classical garden, rocks, water, plants and buildings are not meant to be individual elements. They are part of a complex, harmonious, rhythmic and dynamic system. A system in which the visitor moves, wonders, pauses, receives sensorial perceptions as well as emotions. To use the words of Australian historian of philosophy John Makeham (b. 1955):

... just as a chess-board and chess-pieces do not constitute a chess game, nor a pack of cards a card game, so too a collection of rocks, buildings, ponds and vegetation, does not constitute a garden; only in the act of playing can the garden be said to exist. ... without players there would be no garden because there would be no performance, no play. (Makeham, 1998, p. 187)

According to R. Stewart Johnston, the design of a Chinese classical garden is based on three pillars: the siting of objects, the arrangement of space and the organization of pathways (1991, p. 74). The first has already been described in the previous paragraphs, while the other two elements – space and movement – will be analyzed in the present section. The already mentioned description of the Master of Nets Garden by Qian Daxin is a good starting point:

The garden seems to embody the delight of an endless circularity, and although the dwelling stands close to the marketplace it manages yet to convey a sense of the forgetful pleasures of the clouds and the rivers. It is as if this garden contains, therefore, both the “expansive vistas” and the “hidden mysteries” spoken of by the Tang man-of-letters Liu Zongyuan¹ as constituting the two modes of travel. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 24)

In this passage, one can identify a series of keywords that summarize the spatial conceptions on which the Master of Nets Garden – and Chinese classical gardens in general – are based: *endless circularity, forgetful pleasures, clouds and rivers, expansive vistas and hidden mysteries, travel*.

First of all, the space of the garden should seem immeasurable, infinite, *endless*. To achieve this, different techniques are used, distorting the visitor’s perception of space and time. Borrowed views, long views, manipulation of scale, the use of white walls are some examples.

Endlessness is also characterized by its *circularity*: the space of the garden is non-geometrical, irregular, confusing, so that the visitor loses track of where he is located and how

1 Liu Zongyuan (773-819) was a writer and poet.

long he has been wondering:

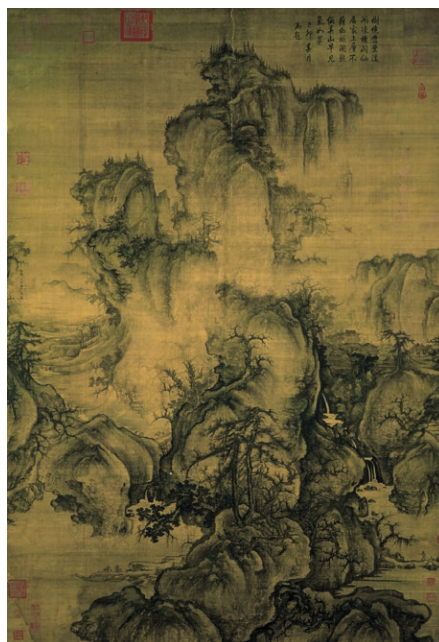
a labyrinthine composition which has not only an aesthetic aim, but also the goal of heightening the observer's attention to the space he is about to cross, encouraging him to forget the external context. (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 44)

Walls, galleries, pavilions and rockeries divide the space into a myriad of small courtyards, giving the impression that many different worlds are contained in the garden. At the same time, doorways, windows and latticed screens keep the visitor always aware of the neighboring worlds. The garden is a microcosm, completely separated from the surrounding city, arousing therefore in the visitor a sense of *forgetful pleasure*.

As a microcosm, the garden is a replica of the world, a reproduction of its landscapes, a representation of Nature. This is what Qian Daxin means when he specifies that the *forgetful pleasures* come from natural elements such as *clouds and rivers*.

The second sentence of the analyzed text is about *travel*. In fact, the space of a Chinese classical garden is dynamic: it should be perceived by moving through it, revealed by walking through its paths and looking through its frames, fragment by fragment. There are no measurable, perspectival views: as in Chinese painting, the point of view continuously changes, shifts, introducing a temporal dimension (fig. 2.6.a).

Travelling through the garden, the visitor encounters sequences of concealment and revelation, of *expansive vistas and hidden mysteries*. Secluded, intimate places on one hand, and wide views that give the illusion of infinity on the other, allow everyone who enters the Master of Nets Garden to experience a variety of emotions, condensing the whole world into one acre of land.



■ **Fig. 2.6.a** Guo Xi (1020-1090), *Early Spring*, 1072, 158.3 x 108.1 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



■ Fig. 2.6.b Thematic units of the Master of Nets Garden.



2.6.1 Thematic units and scenic views

According to Chen Congzhou, in Chinese classical gardens there is a distinction between “viewing in repose” and “viewing in motion” (as cited in Fung, 2002, p. 154), the former being preferred in smaller gardens such as the Master of Nets Garden. It is important to stress that motion and repose are not mutually exclusive, as these concepts

are basically understood correlatively. . . . Where there is motion there must be stillness; where there is stillness there must be motion; and in garden scenery, stillness is lodged in motion and motion arises from stillness. . . . As stillness and motion interweave, they naturally create fine [aesthetic] interest. Thus scenery emerges as one observes motion while in repose and stillness while in motion. (as cited in Fung, 2002, p. 155)

What one views in Chinese classical gardens are scenes that form a narrative sequence, unveiled as one moves through the different courtyards and spaces. Every garden contains a number of sections, each with its own specific characterization and scenic views. Bianca Maria Rinaldi defines these sections “thematic units.” This organization of space “produces the typical Chinese Garden plan in its succession and in its different landscapes, adjacent to but hidden from one another” (2012, p. 53). The visitor discovers these units one by one, with a sense of expectation and surprise, in the same way as one would enjoy a handscroll painting that features many different episodes. The alternation of narrow, secluded places and wide, open areas generates an irregular rhythm and a multiplication of emotions, but a sense of general harmony of the garden is never lost. Edwin T. Morris compares this spatial organization to a line of calligraphy:

Each character is a complete cognitive unit in itself, and the meaning comes with an explosive force; one does not have to wait as in an alphabetic language until all the letters of a word have fallen into place before one can understand it. (Morris, 1983, p. 77)

The organization of thematic units in the Master of Nets Garden has been analyzed by R. Stewart Johnston, who identified a clear hierarchy of spaces. The principal element is the Rosy Cloud Pool, that occupies the central portion of the garden, in a close relationship with the Cloud Ridge. Around it, pavilions, kiosks and galleries provide strategically located viewing positions. The most important building is the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda, on the northern side. Around this main area, there is a series of smaller courtyards, characterized by different landscapes. The third tier is formed by a series of even smaller and more heterogeneous spaces (1991, pp. 80-82).

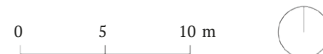
Each thematic unit features one or more scenic views, whose harmonious composition is



■ Fig. 2.6.c Long view with the Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge and the Rosy Cloud Pool.



■ Fig. 2.6.d Long views in the Master of Nets Garden.



conceived in order to convey pleasant sensations and emotions to the visitor. Every scenic view has its own peculiar character, given by arrangement of elements that can be complex or simple, but are always in a perfect balance. Their aesthetic appreciation can be amplified by references to famous masterpieces of painting or literature, by a poetic name, or by the presence of metaphorical and symbolic elements. Scenic views are often constructed as if they were paintings, using the typical Chinese “principle of the three depths,” that consists in arranging objects on a sequence of three plans: foreground, middle ground and background.

2.6.2 Borrowed views

“Borrowed views” (*jie jing*) are a very common technique in Chinese classical gardens. The *Yuan Ye* defines it as follows:

Although gardens have borders which demarcate what is inside the garden from what is outside, when it comes to identifying scenes there is no need to be restricted by considerations of what lies close at hand and what is distant. [In this way the garden may embrace] bright-hued mountains towering in splendour and weathered-red temple roofs soaring into the sky. For as far as the eye can see, anything may be embraced. (as cited in Makeham, 1998, p. 188)

This means that, in creating a scene, the designer can use elements that are located outside the boundaries of the garden, such as mountains or pagodas. This technique allows the visitor to forget the spatial limits of the garden, evoking a sense of boundlessness and infinity. While Chinese classical gardens are generally introverted spaces, borrowed landscapes represent an important exception.

This principle, though, if considered in its more general definition of “borrowing scenery from one space to another,” (Johnston, 1991, p. 82) can be found all over the garden: windows that pierce a wall and “borrow” what is in the neighboring courtyard, views that can be enjoyed from the inside of a building through a latticed screen. Not only visual elements, but also sounds and scents could be the object of this technique. And, through a terrace or a reflection in a pond, even the sky could be “borrowed.”

2.6.3 Long views

Another important technique that serves to amplify the perceived space of the garden is the “long view.” In the Master of Nets Garden, this is a crucial feature that gives to the visitor the impression that the space is much bigger than it actually is (fig. 2.6.c).



■ **Fig. 2.6.e** View from the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion.



■ **Fig. 2.6.f** View of the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion from the Shoot Ducks Corridor.



■ **Fig. 2.6.g** Setting off: plants and rocks against a white wall.



■ **Fig. 2.6.h** Connecting and separating: a gallery.



■ **Fig. 2.6.i** Open and close: a dark grotto and the bright Rosy Cloud Pool.



■ **Fig. 2.6.j** Level and solid: the contrast between rockeries and water.

2.6.4 Polarities

In Chinese classical gardens, composition is based on the balance of polar concepts. Garden designers constantly search for harmony between *yin* and *yang*, not as conflicting qualities, but as elements that complete each other. This translates to a balance between

emptiness and fullness, movement and quiescence, curvature and straightness, high and low, large and small, feelings and scenes, persistence over time and temporality, and the artificial and the natural. (Makeham, 1998, p. 190)

This is further explained by Qing Dynasty writer Shen Fu (1763-1825) in *Six Chapters from a Floating Life*:

In composing garden pavilions and towers, suites of rooms and covered walkways, piling rocks into mountains, or planting flowers to achieve an appropriate configuration, the aim is to see the small in the large and the large in the small, to have fullness in emptiness and emptiness in fullness. Sometimes concealing and other times revealing, sometimes the effect is sought on the surface while sometimes it is sought in the depths. (as cited in Makeham, 1998, p. 190)

Greg Missingham explains how this concept is translated into the concrete design of the garden by identifying a series of composition techniques (2001, p. 37). Here follows a list of the ones that are particularly relevant for the Master of Nets Garden:

- “Contrapositional scenes,” that consists in having two different scenes facing each other, often across a lake (figs. 2.6.e-f);
- “Setting off,” that consists in having an element stand out from its background, for example a plant against a white wall, a bright flower among green leaves, a peculiar sound in a silent atmosphere (fig. 2.6.g);
- “Connecting and separating,” that consists in having a path linking two places but at the same time dividing the space (fig. 2.6.h);
- “Open and close,” that consists in the contrast between dark and lit areas (fig. 2.6.i);
- “Level and solid,” that consists in the contrast between rough rockeries and smooth surfaces like water or pavements (fig. 2.6.j);
- “Exposing and concealing,” one of the main themes of Chinese classical gardens, as explained at the beginning of section 2.6.



■ Fig. 2.6.k Agglomeration: the combination of rocks that creates the Cloud Ridge.



■ Fig. 2.6.m Themmatization: conifers in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.



■ Fig. 2.6.l Transformation: a pomegranate tree as a *penjing* in front of the Zither Chamber.



■ Fig. 2.6.n Atectonics: a Lake Tai stone stands vertically near the Jade-Containing Spring.

2.6.5 Naturalness

Achieving *ziran* (自然), which can be translated as “naturalness” or “spontaneity,” is one of the main goals when designing a Chinese classical garden. According to Maggie Keswick, this consists in “making the whole thing look as if it had happened without human aid” (1978, p. 125). Greg Missingham lists a set of techniques that, while being artificial and constituting a deviation from “real” Nature, are used to achieve a sense of *ziran* in the garden. Chapter 5 will explain why this paradox is only apparent; for now, it will suffice to present an overview of such techniques:

- “Agglomeration,” that consists in combining a large quantity of elements in order for them to be perceived as an overall form (for example, a combination of rocks being perceived as a mountain, fig. 2.6.k);
- “Deviation from natural ecology,” that consists in having only a limited number of animal and plant species in the garden, and fewer vegetation layers (trees without underbrush);
- “Translation of three-dimensional units into planes,” that allows to manipulate the scale of objects giving the impression of wide landscapes even in small spaces;
- “Transformation,” that consists in radically altering natural elements (for example the *penjing*, fig. 2.6.l);
- “Thematization,” that consists in creating “thematic” courtyards where the collection of a certain category of species (for example conifers) is a deviation from Nature (fig. 2.6.m);
- “Symbolic substitution,” that consists, for example, in using rocks to represent mountains;
- “Atectonics,” that consists in using elements against their nature (for example having huge Lake Tai rocks stand vertically, fig. 2.6.n).

2.6.6 Multisensoriality

In experiencing space, visual perceptions are not the only ones that contribute to the idea of place that one gets. Sounds, smells and tactile impressions are just as important, and the designers of Chinese classical gardens knew this very well, therefore they created spaces where

Visitors could not only see beautiful scenes, but also hear the agreeable singing of streams and sweet chirping of orioles and insects. Aroma of peach and plum blossoms in spring, faint scent of lotus in the summer, sweet smell of orange osmanthus in autumn and delicate fragrance of calyx canthus in winter are all good enjoyments

for sense of smell. In addition, vernal spring breeze blowing gently through willows and sometimes through one's face also gives visitors a very tender and delicate feeling. (Lou, 2003, p. 145)

The concept of multisensoriality lies in several manifestations of Chinese culture. The idea of *image* (*xiang wang*) found in the *Zhuangzi* is “living ‘Dao’ including image, shadow, light, sound, and fragrance” (Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 174). Even in landscape paintings one can experience the beauty of the sounds evoked by what is seen: as said by Qing Dynasty painter Dai Xi (1801-1860), “you can feel the sound of bamboo and spring, not because you can hear by your ears, but from the no sound” (as cited in Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 175).

The different inputs, provided by different sensorial perceptions, lead the visitor of a Chinese classical garden to create his own personal, subjective, psychological idea of the place. Imagination plays a key role, allowing him to hear the sound of raindrops just by looking at lotus flowers in a pond, or feel a cool breeze during a hot summer day just by hearing those same lotuses rustling in the water.

Sounds, in particular, are an essential feature of gardens: Qing Dynasty scholar Chen Fuyao writes in his *Recipe on Planting* that

without the flying butterflies and bees, the blooming flowers will lack the nature charm; as for the time with soundless crows and chilly wind, without cicada at sunset and cricket at midnight, how can you tell that autumn has been on the lonely garden? (as cited in Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 175)

In the *Shi Jing* (“Book of Poetry,” 11th - 8th century BCE), the first collection of Chinese poems, almost 28% of the text is related to the sounds produced by landscapes (S. Zhao, 2017, p. 242).

The sounds that can be found in the Master of Nets Garden are both natural and artificial. The first category includes sounds produced by water, rain, wind and animals (birds and insects). The second refers to music, for which there is a dedicated courtyard in the southern part of the garden, whose architecture is designed with the purpose of enhancing sounds. Finally, a third peculiar category can be identified: silence, a greatly appreciated element in Chinese culture. Again, this does not only refer to an objective situation of absence of sounds, but of a subjective, psychological condition: “you can directly feel the existence of silence without realizing the noisy birds” (Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 173).

2.6.7 Walls

Walls are one of the most important elements in Chinese classical gardens, as well as in Chinese architecture and urban planning in general. They were used in a myriad of different

ways and, from an architectural point of view, they were developed in China much more than in other parts of the world. As Maggie Keswick wrote, “there is very little . . . that the Chinese did not do with this essentially prosaic element” (1978, p. 136).

In a garden, a wall is used to divide and organize the space, but at the same time it unifies it by being the running theme that characterizes all the different areas. Besides, it also provides a neutral background for plants and rocks and conveys a feeling of calm and quietness.

In the gardens of Suzhou, walls are usually white. Despite their simplicity, they can evoke an incredible variety of images and feelings depending on how they are hit by the light. They may disappear in the mist, be firm and solid as mountains, or be a canvas on which black, neat shadows are projected.

Plants and rocks are often used to conceal the corner and edges of the walls. This deletes their connection to the ground and to the adjacent elements, making them completely independent from the surrounding space. Therefore, the wall, similarly to the void areas typical of Chinese landscape paintings, becomes an evocation of infinity: “the wall which encloses and divides space also serves to extend it symbolically beyond all bounds” (Keswick, 1978, p. 134; fig. 2.6.o).

To the Chinese, “void” (*kong*, 空) is a positive, concrete element, a creator of space. This concept is explained in the *Dao De Jing*:

Thirty spokes of a wheel share one hub;
In its emptiness exists the usefulness of the cart.
Mix water with clay thus making a vessel;
In its emptiness exists the usefulness of the vessel.
Cut out doors and windows thus making a room;
In their emptiness exists the usefulness of the room.
Therefore: what exists thus makes a thing profitable;
Emptiness thus makes it useful. (2015, ch. 11)

Both in painting and garden design, void is a crucial part of the composition. This idea becomes clearer if one looks at *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring*, a work by Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuan (c. 1160-65 - 1225; fig. 2.6.p). In it, “we see that only half of the painting has been touched by the brush, but it is the empty part of the painting that draws our eye” (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 18). Just like in garden walls, the “void” is essential because it allows the viewer to complete the composition with his own imagination.

2.6.8 Doorways, windows, screens

In Chinese classical gardens, framing a view is a widely used technique that allows the designer to influence precisely the way in which the visitor will perceive it, altering its



■ **Fig. 2.6.o** The white wall in front of the Zither Chamber extends infinitely the space of the garden, stimulating the imagination of the visitor.



■ **Fig. 2.6.p** Ma Yuan (c. 1160-65 - 1225), *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring*, 1190, 27.4 x 43.1 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

depth or highlighting certain parts rather than other ones. This can be achieved by using natural elements such as branches or rocks, but the main elements that play this crucial role are doorways, windows and screens.

Doorways are particularly important because they are the passages that lead from one area of the garden to a different one, giving an anticipation of what the visitor will find on the other side (figs. 2.6.q-r):

It is not necessary to see the innermost rooms of dwellings in the mountains to know their peaceful seclusion. A glimpse of the gate is enough to recognize the abode of a follower of the Tao and make one wish to linger. (Morris, 1983, p. 201)

When crossing a threshold, the visitor should pause, reflect, become aware of the change of space and mood. For this reason, doors often take bizarre shapes or display sculptures or stone tables with the name of the place they give access to. To make the visitor slow down, they can also be associated to a series of steps or a change in the texture of paving.

One of the most common kinds of door is the so-called “moon-gate,” a circular hole in a wall (fig. 2.6.s). In Chinese culture, the circle symbolizes perfection and heaven. From a practical point of view, this shape, combined with its often-dark edge, helps the visitor focus on the view beyond it. Besides, it forces him to cross it individually, giving to the act of entering a deeper meaning.

Windows, not serving the practical function of allowing people to move between spaces, can feature more elaborate decorations. Some of them are empty (figs. 2.6.t-u), while other ones show elaborated lattice patterns (figs. 2.6.v-y). This kind of ornamentation is made of roof tiles, brick strips or clay, usually whitewashed. It can form geometrical or naturalistic images and, besides its aesthetic purpose, it also serves practical functions like controlling sunlight while allowing air to circulate.

Half windows and half walls, the finely carved wood screens that often fill the space between a building’s pillars play a similar role (figs. 2.6.z-aa). Their dense pattern served, in the past, to contain translucent paper, creating interesting plays of light and shadow both during the day and at night.

Sometimes, doors or windows can frame a mirror, creating illusions that are not immediately recognized by the visitor, giving him the confusing impression of large spaces laying beyond them.

Like the walls, also the framing elements analyzed in this paragraph can be interpreted as elements that represent “void” (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 12). The planes that organize space in Chinese landscape paintings are separated by unpainted areas, which make distances



■ Fig. 2.6.q An access to the garden.



■ Fig. 2.6.r Door near the Late Spring Annex.



■ Fig. 2.6.s Moon-gate near the Gather Emptiness Study.



■ Fig. 2.6.t Windows in the One-Slating-Bamboo-Twig Veranda.



■ Fig. 2.6.u Window in the One-Slating-Bamboo-Twig Veranda.



■ Fig. 2.6.v A series of latticed windows near the Late Spring Annex.



■ Fig. 2.6.w Latticed window near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



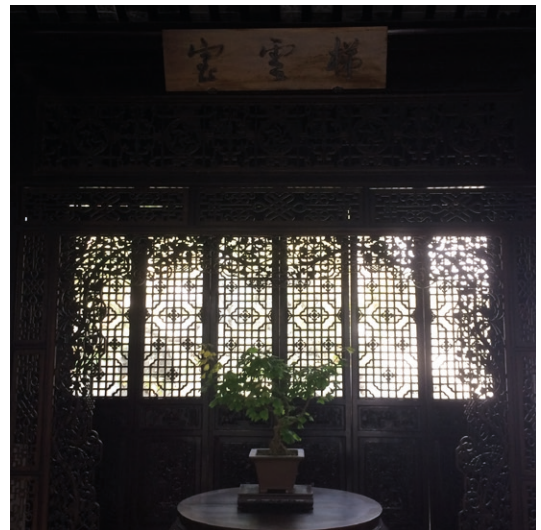
■ Fig. 2.6.x Latticed window near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ Fig. 2.6.y Latticed window near the Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber.



■ Fig. 2.6.z Carved wooden screen in the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion.



■ Fig. 2.6.aa Carved wooden screen in the Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber.



■ Figs. 2.6.ab-ac Window as a painting. Fan Kuan (990-1020), *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, c. 1000, 206.3 x 103.3 cm.



■ Fig. 2.6.ad False windows on the residence's wall.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ae** Gallery near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda, seen from the top of the Cloud Ridge.



■ **Fig. 2.6.af** Gallery near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ag** Gallery, latticed window and banana tree.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ah** View from the gallery near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ai** The semi-circular Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge.



■ **Fig. 2.6.aj** View of the zigzag bridge and the Rosy Cloud Pool.

and depths indefinite. By comparing the view framed by a lattice window in the Master of Nets Garden to the painting *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan (990-1020), it becomes clear that the mechanisms used to alter the perception of space are quite similar (figs. 2.6.ab-ac). They both follow the “principle of the three depths,” that in the case of the window translates into the lattice decoration being the foreground, plants and rocks being the middle ground and the white wall being the background. Moreover, the base of the mountain disappears in the mist, so that its distance from the foreground is undeterminable. In the same way, from the window one cannot see the ground, and therefore it is not possible for the observer to measure the space between him and the background wall, making the courtyard seem bigger than it is.

By understanding that the presence of “void” is intended to spark the visitor’s imagination, one can also understand the reason for the presence of a series of false windows on the western wall of the residence (fig. 2.6.ad). Even though they seem to have no function, they hint at a view to another place, breaking the solid mass of the biggest construction in the Master of Nets Garden.

2.6.9 Paths, galleries, bridges

Paths, galleries and bridges are the elements that organize movements across the garden. According to Wang Yi, in fact, “for a successful garden space organizational structure, its premise is to ingrain an ingenious design of paths in the seemingly random arrangement of many landscapes” (2015, p. 80). Connections can be established through paths in the open air, galleries that shield from sun and rain, and bridges that allow to cross bodies of water. They ensure that the garden is “seeable, tourable and livable” (Lou, 2003, p. 58).

Paths in the open air have free, curvilinear, meandering shapes, while covered walkways feature angular, zigzag configurations. The latter, while sheltering the visitor, should not create a sense of enclosure, but evoke an ambiguity given by the fact that one is, at the same time, both in an interior space and outdoors. Galleries both connect spaces and divide them, frame views and guide the visitor in his experience of the garden (figs. 2.6.ae-ah).

Bridges are a particular declination of the connecting element. In Chinese classical gardens, they can take many different forms, depending on the topography, the configuration of the water body, the shape and function of the surrounding buildings. Some examples that can be found in the Master of Nets Garden are a zigzag bridge made of stone (fig. 2.6.ai) and a small, semi-circular one (fig. 2.6.aj) that, combined with its own reflection, forms the perfect shape of a circle.

Paths, galleries and bridges in the gardens often take tortuous, curved, zigzagging shapes.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ak** Pavement pattern near the Ladder-to-Clouds Chamber.



■ **Fig. 2.6.al** Pavement pattern near the Late Spring Annexe.



■ **Fig. 2.6.am** Mosaic with a crane and a pine tree surrounded by bats.



■ **Fig. 2.6.an** Mosaic with a fish.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ao** Mosaic with an endless knot.



■ **Fig. 2.6.ap** Mosaic with a butterfly.

The importance of the concept of “tortuosity” (*qu*, 曲), in fact, is demonstrated in the *Dao De Jing*:

What is wrong [*qu*] then becomes whole and perfect.
What is bent then becomes straight. (2015, ch. 22)

This is relevant, according to Stanislaus Fung, because it implies that there is a strong correlation between the body, moving in a winding scene, and the inward movement of sentiments and emotions (2002, pp. 184-185). This relation is shown, for example, in a couplet that has been inscribed in Beijing’s Beihai Park:

The scene winds in accord with the path, poetic sentiments becomes remote
Mountain with sparse trees, opens up a picture. (as cited in Fung, 2002, p. 184)

Variations in the paths imply variation in the experiences and perceptions of the visitor. The constant changes in direction, height, width, texture of the pavement and view slow him down and make him aware of the space that surrounds him. Whenever the path encounters a scene worth admiring, a stopping place is created: it could be a pavilion, but also a simple big, natural rock inserted in the paving. The rhythm of movements and pauses defines a narrative sequence. When walking through the garden, the visitor feels a constant sense of surprise and discovery, and his perceptions are so altered that even time is distorted (Bedingfeld, 1997, p. 36).

2.6.10 Pavements

In a Chinese classical garden, every detail is carefully designed in order to enrich the experiences and perceptions of the visitor, and pavements are no exception. The great variety of patterns and textures that can be found in every garden is possible thanks to the wide array of materials that are used: bricks, pebbles, stones, broken tiles, fragments of porcelain. Touches of grass growing in the gaps between the elements make the pavement lively.

Designs are often symmetrical, with geometric or naturalistic figures repeated in regular patterns (figs. 2.6.ak-al). Common forms are polygons and quatrefoils, but also flowers and birds. Changes in texture or pattern announce analogous changes in the function or mood of the space.

In strategically chosen points of the garden, elaborate mosaics representing animals, plants or mythological creatures appear (figs. 2.6.am-ap). They mark changes in direction or places where to stop and admire a view, while at the same time suggesting metaphors and reflections on their symbolic meanings.



■ Fig. 2.6.aq *Gualuo* and *meirenkao* in the Shoot Ducks Corridor.



■ Fig. 2.6.ar Interior display in the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall.



■ Fig. 2.6.as Interior display in the Pick Talents Building.



■ Fig. 2.6.at Interior display in the Late Spring Annexe.



■ Fig. 2.6.au Interior display in the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.

2.6.11 Furniture

The importance of furniture in Chinese classical garden should not be underestimated. Chen Congzhou wrote that “a garden without furniture is like a man without learning” (as cited in Johnston, 1991, p. 77). There is a total continuity between exterior and interior spaces, with plants entering the buildings as decorations, flower compositions or *penjing*, and furniture being placed outside, in the courtyards. Every detail, at every different scale, is designed in perfect harmony with the general conception of the garden. In fact, there was almost no distinction between the Chinese conceptions of “furniture” (*xiao mu kung*, “small woodwork”) and “architecture” (*da mu kung*, “large woodwork”): at both scales, wood was mortised and tenoned with the same techniques. This way, a deep harmonious integration was achieved.

The interior space and the external scenery complement each other. From inside the building, one can enjoy the scenes of the garden, framed in finely decorated wooden *gualuo* (ornamental elements attached under the architrave) and *meirenkao* (wooden benches/railings), while the elegant forms of the architectures become part of other scenes, enhancing their beauty.

Arranging the decorative objects inside a room was an elaborate art, called *jushi chenshe* (“interior display”), and intimately linked to the garden environment. The items displayed had to form harmonious compositions, in order to manifest the social status of the owner, as well as his culture and human character.

2.7 NAMES

As discussed in the previous sections, Chinese classical gardens are designed to awaken the visitor’s imagination. This is achieved through the use of natural and architectural elements, but not only. Beyond their physical appearance, gardens have layers over layers of deeper symbolic, metaphorical meanings and references, making the visitor’s experience “not only sensual and philosophical, but also intellectual, requiring a great knowledge of classic learning . . .” (Feng, 1998, p. 353). The labyrinth of paths, courtyards and buildings is mirrored by an equally intricate “mental maze of scholarly interpretations and well-chosen metaphors” (Keswick, 1978, p. 150).

Strategically placed calligraphy guides the visitor in his interpretation and enjoyment of the garden (figs. 2.7.a-f). The signposts spread all over the garden can be compared to the colophons in a Chinese traditional painting: they enrich and deepen the meaning of the composition. Without calligraphy, both a garden and a painting are incomplete. The char-



■ Fig. 2.7.a Inscription near the Sedan Hall.



■ Fig. 2.7.b Inscription above a door near the Zither Chamber



■ Fig. 2.7.c Inscription above a door near the Small-Hill-
Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ Fig. 2.7.d Inscription above a door near
the Late Spring Annexe.



■ Fig. 2.7.e Inscription on a rock near the
Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge.



■ Fig. 2.7.f Inscription on a rock near the Jade-
Containing Spring.

acters in the gardens can consist in famous couplets from the rich literary tradition of China, appreciative poems composed by visitors, or names of the buildings and scenes. Thanks to the ambiguity of Chinese characters, inscriptions do not convey straightforward meanings, but leave some space for interpretation, adding mystery and stimulating imagination.

Names, in particular, play an essential role. In the famous novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written around the middle of the 18th century by Cao Xueqin (1715 or 1724 - 1763 or 1764), a character named Chia Cheng says that, without names, “half the pleasure of the visit [of the garden] will be lost” and that “all those prospects and pavilions – even the rocks and trees and flowers will seem somehow incomplete without that touch of poetry which only the written word can lend a scene” (as cited in Keswick, 1978, p. 151).

The choice of the right names was a great challenge for the owner of the garden: Ming Dynasty scholar Zhang Dai (1599 - c. 1684) even says that “the most difficult thing about making a garden is naming; it is even more difficult than the physical construction” (Makeham, 1998, p. 193). In fact, names should at the same time be inspired by famous poems or classic texts from the tradition, express the theme and emotions of the scene they are meant to define, and show the personality and creativity of the owner.

According to Confucius, names have a “prescriptive function” (Makeham, 1998, p. 192): that means that they are not merely descriptions of the existing order of things, but catalysts with the power of influencing a change in said order. Chinese scholars therefore expressed in the names they chose for their gardens – and for the buildings and scenes inside them – their wishes and intentions on who they wanted to be, rather than describing who they were. A garden was a place for self-cultivation, and names gave a clear definition to the goals of the owner, to his project of self-realization.

Besides, names were also vehicles for longevity, as they would represent an extension of the owner and his intentions even after his death (Makeham, 1998, p. 200). The garden could be radically changed in its physical layout throughout the centuries, but if the original name was kept, the intention of the original owner survived. The Master of Nets Garden is a prime example of this idea.

Thus, rocks, water, plants and buildings on one hand, and written words on the other, complement and enrich each other.

2.8 LIFE IN THE GARDEN

The Master of Nets Garden was a private scholar garden, whose main purpose was to provide its owner with a way to escape from society. It constituted a refuge from the busy

Spring:

Shoot Ducks Corridor

Summer:

Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion

Autumn:

Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk

Winter:

One-Slanting-Bamboo-Twig Veranda

Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda



Fig. 2.8.a Areas designed to be enjoyed in a specific season.

0 5 10 m



and stressful life of a government official, while still being located inside the city walls, thus combining the Daoist aspiration of living in Nature like a hermit with the Confucian duties towards the State and the family. As a place for both social and intellectual activities, the garden was an essential part of the life of a member of the elite: “the Chinese feel that unless a man has a garden he scarcely grasped the reason for existence” (Graham, 1938, p. 9).

Gardens were not only to be enjoyed by their owner, family and friends, as they were usually accessible also to visitors. Scholars and “respectable” people, according to Craig Clunas, could always access a garden just by tipping the gatekeeper (1996, p. 94) but, sometimes, on the occasion of particular festivals or holidays, all citizens were welcomed. For example, in the Joyful Aspiration Garden, owned by writer Zhang Fengyi (1527-1613), during the spring season, when flowers were blooming, people were free to bring their own mats and drinks and to hold banquets (Zhu, 2013, p. 84). Sometimes, gardens could become very crowded, as happens at one point in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when in the garden live at the same time the owner, his sisters and cousins, their attendants and servants, a group of child actresses and a community of Buddhist nuns. In a climate of strong competition between the members of the elite, the garden was a symbol of status and wealth, so by welcoming visitors, garden owners hoped to gain fame and recognition. They also encouraged visitors to realize paintings and poems that described the beauty of their garden, in order to improve their own reputation.

Social considerations aside, in Edwin T. Morris’s interpretation, the main purpose of private scholar gardens was to enhance creativity, to be “the terrain for imagination” (1983, p. 69). This view is supported by several passages of the *Yuan Ye*: according to Ji Cheng, in fact, the garden must “nourish the heart” and make “thoughts . . . fly more quickly than the brush” (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 69). For the Chinese, Nature is a major source of inspiration:

The flowers gleam in red and violet. There are magical beings everywhere. You can drink your wine like an old philosopher or an official who has done with his career, and in your leisure, write poetry. Inspiration will be stirred by the fresh plants. (Morris, 1983, p. 69)

2.8.1 Seasons

Life in the garden followed the rhythm of the seasons. Their cycle was thought to have a profound influence on the health and the general well-being of people, therefore in the design of the garden a great care was put in ensuring that the spaces could be enjoyed in different ways depending on the conditions of light and weather, during the course of the

whole year.

In the Master of Nets Garden, the main space presents different views when hit by the first rays of the sun at dawn, when it is embedded in the rosy atmosphere of dusk or when the moon reflects on the calm waters of the lake at night. Plant species such as pines, bamboo and banana trees are carefully chosen and planted in strategic places in order to produce evocative sound effects when the wind swirls through them or when raindrops hit their leaves. Other ones, such as peonies, pomegranates and maple trees are used to enrich the scenes with the bright colors of their flowers, fruits and leaves in different seasons.

Some areas of the garden are designed specifically for being enjoyed in a certain season, with buildings and plants whose features are appropriate to the weather of each part of the year.

2.8.2 Activities

Private scholar gardens were places dedicated to meditation, contemplation of Nature and appreciation and practice of arts such as painting, literature, calligraphy and music. Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Changwen (c. 1041-1098), in the record he wrote of his garden, called *Le Pu*, recounts the activities he performed every day:

every morning I recite Fu Xi and King Wen's Book of Changes and Confucius's Spring and Autumn Annals, search for the profundity and subtlety of the Book of Songs and Book of Documents, and seek clarity in the institutions of the [three] Books on rituals and the standard pitch pipes of the Music. Every afternoon I read extensively in historical works and observe one by one the historic figures, so as to investigate the rights and wrongs of these men of old and to rectify the successes and failures of these previous histories. At leisure, I stroll around with a cane, free and unfettered, up to the top of the hill and down to the edge of the pond. The flying birds are not startled, but the white cranes in front lead my way. Wading through the shallow water I hold up the lower hem of my gown, walking on the level land I remain calm and contented. I plant trees and irrigate the garden, ploughing in winter and weeding in summer. Even high official positions and handsome salaries would not be enough to substitute for the joy I have. (as cited in Xu, 2004, p. 31)

Gardens, however, were not just places for solitary intellectual reflections, but also for social interaction and gatherings. Scholars would meet to share their thoughts, play chess, drink tea or wine, make elixirs in pursuit of immortality, take part in poetry competitions or drinking games.

Besides, gardens were places for family life, with children playing, domestic affairs being dealt with, festivals being celebrated, theatrical plays being performed, and romantic encounters taking place under the stars.

The *Yuan Ye* claims that “happiness consists in enjoying one’s freedom” (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 93), and it seems that indeed gardens were designed to accommodate all the different freedoms sought by their owner.

2.8.3 Organization of functions

In laying out the spatial organization of the garden, the designer had to carefully plan the disposition of all the different functions in order for the owner and visitors to fully enjoy the activities performed. The areas where the family lived and where the owner studied and meditated had to be placed in remote and quiet parts of the garden, while pavilions for feasts, celebrations and the entertainment of guests had to be located near the main entrance. Besides, the landscapes had to match the function assigned to every specific area.

However, all the buildings of the garden were characterized by a high degree of flexibility. Almost every pavilion could become a place for games as well as a bedroom, while courtyards, with the addition of a simple brazier, could become kitchens or teahouses. The studios of the garden could turn into houses for relatives or friends of the owner, as well as his wives or concubines: in fact, the rooms of the residence were no different from the buildings scattered around the garden, and presented the exact same level of comfort.

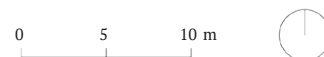
In the Master of Nets Garden, the residence occupies the eastern section of the property. The first three halls form the public area of the house, with the Main Entrance, the Sedan Hall (“essentially a well-appointed garage,” as defined by Henderson, 2013, p. 23) and the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall, that was the main room, dedicated to welcoming guests. The fourth hall, called Pick Talents Building, was a private space, where only intimate friends and relatives were allowed. On its upper floor, the family would sleep. This place was where women would spend most of their day. The buildings on the north-east corner included the kitchen and the domestic quarters, strategically placed near the back entrance of the property and connected through a long corridor to all the main halls of the residence.

The garden, that was located to the west, was organized in two main areas: the portion to the south of the lake, for social activities, and the one to the north, for intellectual activities. The first included a pavilion for the entertainment of important guests (the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove Veranda*), a space for music and performances (the *Zither Chamber*) and a guest house (the *Tread-Upon-Harmony Lodge*). On the other hand, in the northern section there was a library where the owner would conduct his business and practice calligraphy (the *Five Peaks Library*), another, more secluded, personal study (the *Late Spring Annexe*), a building dedicated to the appreciation of artistic and cultural artifacts (the *Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda*) and one for meditation (the *Gather Emptiness*

1. Residential Quarters
2. Area for social activities
3. Area for intellectual activities
4. Rosy Cloud Pool (social and intellectual activities)



■ Fig. 2.8.b Organization of functions.



Study). In the middle, the lake was surrounded by pavilions designed for contemplation of Nature (such as the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk, for contemplating the moon) and a space for the tea ceremony (the Shoot Ducks Corridor).

3. PLANTS, SPACE AND LIFE

3.1 THE GATHER EMPTINESS STUDY AND THE ROLE OF BAMBOO

“The movements of design intervention are integrated with the movements of natural phenomena and human inhabitation in a rhythmic unfolding”: with these words Stanislaus Fung describes the harmony that permeates the relation between the space of the garden, the natural elements and the life of its inhabitants (2002, p. 197). This relation is precisely the object of the analysis that will be carried out in the present chapter. Specifically, eight sections of the Master of Nets Garden will be studied, with a special focus on the plants that are grown in each of them.

The first will be the Gather Emptiness Study, a place devoted mainly to meditation and located in the northern part of the garden. In front of it, one can find two clumps of bamboo, on the sides of its entrance. In this section, the significance of bamboo in Chinese culture will be explored, and its relationship with the space of the Gather Emptiness Study and the practice of meditation will be discussed.

3.1.1 Bamboo: biology and history

Bamboos are evergreen¹ perennial² plants. They constitute the subfamily *Bambusoideae*, which belongs to the family *Poaceae*, generally referred to as “grass.”³ They comprise three tribes, 125 genera and more than 1,400 species, five hundred of which can be found in China, where they constitute 5% of the forested area (Cultivation and Uses of Bamboo, 2016).

The bamboos that can be found in front of the Gather Emptiness Study are specimens of *Bambusa multiplex*, of the tribe *Bambuseae*. This species is commonly known as “hedge bamboo” or “Chinese goddess bamboo.” It is native to Southern China, the Himalayas, Sri Lanka and South-East Asia.

Bambusa multiplex is a “clumping” bamboo, meaning that it tends to spread slowly, and its canes are 2 to 7 meters tall with a diameter between 10 and 30 millimeters. Its foliage is particularly dense, and its stem is hollow. New shoots grow in late spring, while flowers appear unpredictably, at intervals that can be 65 to 120 years long. After flowering, the plant

1 Evergreens are plants that keep their leaves green during the whole year.

2 Perennials are plants that live longer than two years.

3 The family *Poaceae* includes around 12,000 species, among which there are cereals, reeds, meadow-grass and sugarcane.

usually declines or dies.

This species can tolerate temperatures down to -8°C , but prolonged periods of cold can be a problem. The ideal conditions for its growth are full sun or partial shadow, high values of humidity and protection from cold winds.

The earliest document that mentions bamboo in China dates back to seven thousand years ago. Five thousand years ago, this plant was used to build treehouses. At the time of the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century), bamboo was widely used in daily life, for food, kitchenware, medicine, clothing, architecture, musical instruments and weapons, as well as for the first books that appeared in China. Since then, this plant has always played a key role in Chinese culture, acquiring more and more symbolical meanings and associations.

3.1.2 Bamboo: meaning of the name

Bambusa multiplex's Chinese name is *pénglái zhú* (蓬萊竹). *Zhú* (竹) is the Chinese word for “bamboo.” The other characters are *péng* (蓬), meaning “fluffy, dishevelled,” but also “clump, cluster,” and *lái* (萊), meaning “weed.” Their combination *pénglái* (蓬萊), however, is “one of the three fabled island in the Eastern Sea, abode of the Immortals.”

Bambusa multiplex is also known as *fèngwěi zhú* (鳳尾竹), that translates as “phoenix tale bamboo”: *fèng* (鳳) means “male phoenix,” while *wěi* (尾) means “tail.” This name, that probably derived from the shape of its leaves, associates *Bambusa multiplex* with virtue and grace, of which the phoenix is a symbol.

Another name for this species is *xiàoshun zhú* (孝順竹), where *xiàoshun* (孝順) means “to show filial piety,” an essential Confucian virtue. The explanation for this name is that *Bambusa multiplex* produces new shoots at the center of the clump during winter and at the edges during spring, thus protecting the old ones from excessive cold and heat in different seasons.

3.1.3 Bamboo: symbolism

Bamboo plays a central role in Chinese culture. Song Dynasty scholar and artist Su Shi (1037-1101), in fact, stated that “It is possible to dine without meat, but one cannot live without bamboo. . . . eating no meat makes people thin, but without bamboo people will become vulgar” (as cited in Lou, 2003, p. 127).

Chinese scholars recognized this plant as a perfect model of self-development: it is strong and yet resilient, surviving the strongest storms without breaking; it shows propriety by growing in limited segments; it stays green during the whole year, symbolizing integrity; it grows in clumps, thus demonstrating a sense of “clan” unity; it has hollow stem,

representing a humble and pure heart; it does not produce flowers, avoiding therefore competition with other plants; it grows quite rapidly. For the Daoists, bamboo was an example of showing strength in apparent weakness; for the Confucians it was a model of bending without breaking, a virtue that a true gentleman should possess. The innumerable uses of bamboo also contributed to enriching its meanings: as it was a key material for producing both paper and musical instruments, it represented a nourishment both for the mind and the emotions.

3.1.4 Bamboo: painting

In Chinese painting, there are two distinct traditions on how to represent this plant: colored bamboo and ink bamboo. The first consists in a realistic, descriptive depiction that shows every detail of the plant, with appropriate shadings and colors. An example is Li Kan's (1244-1320) *Bamboo and Rocks* (fig. 3.1.a). In this work, the bamboo constitutes a moral example, encouraging growth, resilience, self-development and flourishing.

In ink bamboo, on the other hand, the purpose is to convey a feeling rather than to reproduce faithfully a form. An example is Shen Xuan's (active c. 1370-1400) *Bamboo Grove* (fig. 3.1.c). This painting conveys a feeling of tranquility, gentleness, purity and freedom.

Ink bamboo painting is a technique developed by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), who derived it from the principles of calligraphy. It rapidly became very popular among the literati, who recognized in the peculiar shape of this plant a perfect means for expressing their feelings. A key principle for executing this kind of paintings was expressed by Su Shi in his essay *On Wen Yuke's Painting of Bent Bamboo of Yundang Valley*: “xiong you cheng zhu,” that means “bosom has complete bamboo” (as cited in Cheng et al., 2018, p. 186). This means that, before painting, one has to conceive the complete image of the bamboo in his mind. This is essential in order to avoid hesitations and ensuring the rhythm of the brushstrokes. It requires to spend a great amount of time observing bamboos and deeply understanding their shape and structure. The *Manual of the Mustard Seed*, a manual of Chinese painting written during the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), reads:

Unless heart and idea are attuned, there can indeed be no good results. . . . At the moment of putting brush to paper or silk, do not hesitate. From the deepest recesses of the heart should come the power that propels the brush to action. (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 170)

Traditionally, there are some recurring combinations of bamboo and other elements, and each of them expresses a different meaning. The association of bamboo and rocks symbolizes humility and steadfastness, the virtues of the Confucian gentleman. A depiction



■ **Fig. 3.1.a** Li Kan (1244-1320), *Bamboo and Rocks*, 1318, 189.9 x 55.2 cm (each scroll), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.1.b** Unidentified artist, *Crane in a Bamboo Grove*, 14th15th century, 165.9 x 100.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.1.c** Shen Xun (active c. 1370-1400), *Bamboo Grove*, 24.9 x 63.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

■ **Fig. 3.1.d** Detail of Xia Chang (1388-1470), *Bamboo in Wind*, 203.4 x 59.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



of bamboo, pine and plum constitutes the famous motif of the “three friends of winter,” a symbol of longevity, perseverance and integrity. A common combination is that of bamboo and crane (fig. 3.1.b). This bird was very important for Chinese scholars, being their companion much more than dogs or cats, and being an essential presence in Chinese classical gardens. Contemplating Nature together with a crane allowed one to join the flow of the Universe. Cranes were thought to be immortal and to carry souls to Heaven.

Another recurring image is the depiction of bamboos in the wind (fig. 3.1.d). In these paintings, visual perceptions become multi-sensorial, suggesting to the viewer a sense of the sound of wind swirling through bamboo twigs.

3.1.5 Bamboo: literature

One of the first poetic representations of bamboos is found in the *Shi Jing*, the “Book of Poetry”:

By the graceful sweep of these banks,
With the southern hill, so calm in the distance,
[Has the palace arisen], firm as the roots of a clump of bamboos,
[With its roof] like the luxuriant head of a pine tree.
May the brothers [here],
Be loving among themselves,
And have no scheming against one another! (*Book of Poetry*, 2019)

In these verses, the firmness of bamboo roots is compared to the solidity of the palace and of its foundations: this firmness ensures the stability of the lives of the inhabitants, that will be characterized by love and harmony.

A classic image of bamboo in Chinese poetry is its association with the sound of rain and dew on its leaves, recalling once again the multisensorial perceptions mentioned in the previous paragraph. An example is “In Summer at the South Pavilion Thinking of Xing,” by Meng Haoran (689/691-740):

The wind brings me odours of lotuses,
And previous hit bamboo next hit-leaves drip with a music of dew....
I would take up my lute and I would play,
But, alas, who here would understand?
And so I think of you, old friend,
O troubler of my midnight dreams! (*Tang Shi Bai Shou*, 1997)

Another recurring idea is that of a bamboo grove surrounding a secluded place where a recluse would live. This is the case of “The Lodge in the Bamboo Grove” by Wang Wei (699-759):

Alone I sit deep in the bamboo grove,
Plucking the lute and whistling along.
In the deep woods: no one knows,
The bright moon comes to shine upon me. (Cai & Cui, 2012, poetry n. 26)

The same theme is the subject of “Written for the Meditation Lodge Behind the Broken Mountain Temple” by Chang Jian (8th century):

The bamboo path leads to a reclusive site,
The meditation lodge nestles deep in trees and flowers.
The mountain light delights the spirit of birds,
The pond’s reflection empties the mind of man.
All sounds have ceased at this moment,
But the echoes of metal and stone bells linger on. (Cai & Cui, 2012, poetry n. 23)

In these verses, a path flanked by bamboos leads to a secluded place where one can meditate. It is worth noting that the word for “meditation” used in this poem is *chán* (禪), the Chinese transcription of the Sanskrit *dhyana*. *Chan* is a sect of Buddhism that developed in China and had an enormous impact on literature, art and culture. It is also known with its Japanese name, *zen*.

3.1.6 Bamboo: garden design

The *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, written between 1620 and 1627 by Ming Dynasty scholar, painter and garden designer Wen Zhenheng (1585-1645), is considered one of the main sources on garden architecture and interior design of its time. According to it, there are four ways of planting bamboo in a Chinese classical garden: “scattered,” “dense,” “shallow” and “deep.” The first consists in “planting a single bamboo every three or four *chi*¹ . . . and clearing the soil to allow it to spread.” The second is “planting in a scattered fashion but with four or five stems to a clump thus concentrating its roots.” The “shallow” method consists in planting bamboos not very deeply. Finally, the “deep” method is similar to the previous one, but with the addition of soil that enhances the plant’s growth (Wen, 2019, p. 41).

In a garden, bamboos are valued for their bright green color, that does not fade during winter, and for their dense foliage, that produces a pleasant sound when the wind swirls through it. A typical arrangement consists in planting bamboos in front of a white wall, so that their shape and the shadow that they project can be perceived more distinctly and become an object of contemplation. This is recommended also by Wen Zhenheng: “several

1 A *chi* is a traditional unit of length, corresponding to about 90 to 120 centimeters.

stems may be planted upright along a stretch of wall” (2019, p. 41). In order to focus the visitors’ attention on this kind of scene, garden designers often framed it within a window, as suggested by the *Yuan Ye*: “before the window one plants bamboo” (as cited in Johnston, 1991, p. 67).

Bamboos can also be planted to form a sort of curtain, that holds both an aesthetic value, filtering light and undulating with the wind, and a practical function, as a barrier that protects the space from the cold winds of winter.

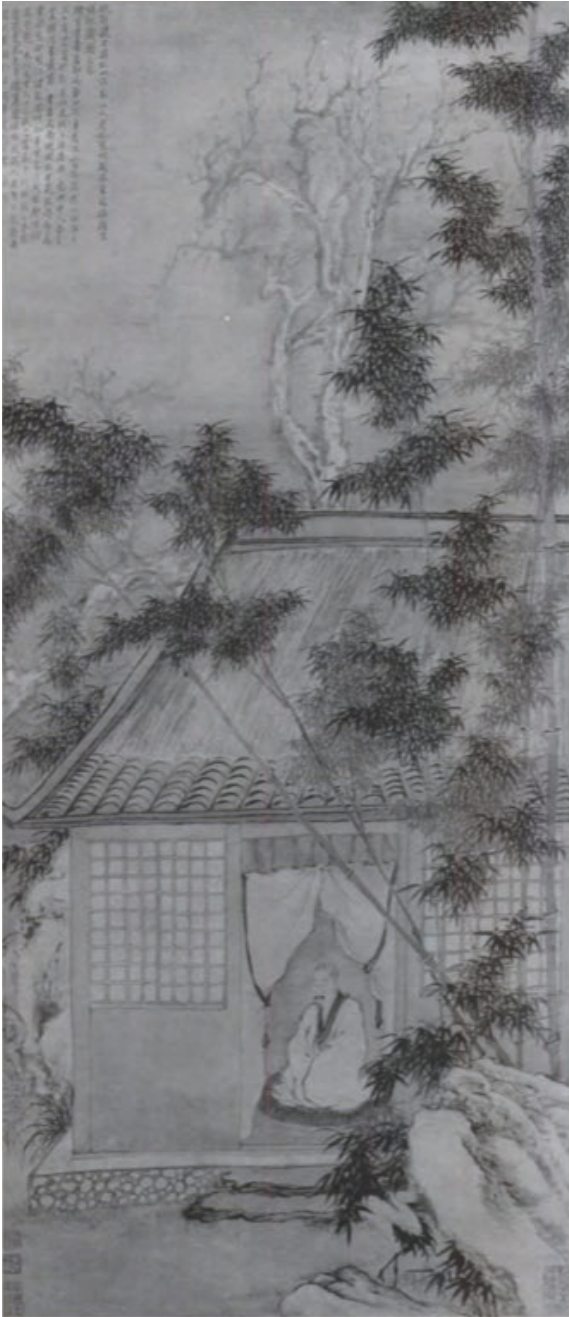
A similar arrangement consists in planting bamboos on two sides of a courtyard, again in front of whitewashed walls. This configuration, thanks to the projected shadows of the plants on the walls and their waving with the wind, creates the illusion of a deeper grove that surrounds a pavilion (fig. 3.1.e).

By creating the image of a secluded pavilion in the middle of bamboos, one can achieve a sensation of peace and tranquility, as described by Ming Dynasty scholar Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402):

The green bamboo, erect as jade tablets, looks down on the pavilion set among the waters. Tranquil feelings of relaxation and happiness, residing in the depths of the flourishing forest. Grey snow sprays on the cold blustering wind, and green shade shuts out the bright day. (as cited in Yi Wang, 1998, p. 243)



■ Fig. 3.1.e Sun Wen (c. 1818-1904), illustration from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lüshun Museum, Dalian.



■ **Fig. 3.1.f** Luo Ping (1733-1799), *The Sleeping Monk – Meditation Pavilion in a Bamboo Grove*, 1791, 107.3 x 47 cm, C. C. Wang Family Collection, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.1.g** Qian Gu (1508-1578), *A Chess Game in a Bamboo Hut*, 1567, 62.1 x 32.3 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang.

3.1.7 Meditation in Chinese classical gardens

The practice of meditation plays an important role in Chinese culture, being a key element of both Daoism and Buddhism. These traditions have influenced each other in the course of the centuries, originating a wide array of methods and techniques for meditating. Some of the main principles and techniques of Daoist and Chan Buddhist meditation will be now summarized, in order to understand how this activity could be practiced in Chinese classical gardens.

According to Livia Kohn, Daoist meditation is based on three principles (2008, p. 118):

- *Ding* (定), meaning “settle, stabilize, definite, firm,” and consisting in deep concentration and contemplation;
- *Guan* (觀), meaning “look carefully, watch, observe, scrutinize,” and consisting in observing and analyzing sensory perceptions in order to achieve emptiness and merge with the Dao;
- *Cun* (存), meaning “exist, be present, live,” and consisting in visualizing energies, flows, *qi* movements, thought processes, deities or scriptures.

A common Daoist technique is *zuowang* (坐忘), meaning “sitting and forgetting.” It aims at achieving a state of deep absorption, where one “forgets” his own ego and individual identity and merges with the flow of the Universe.

Similar principles can be found in Chan Buddhist meditation. Some of its most common techniques include:

- *Zuochan* (坐禪), meaning “sitting meditation,” and consisting in achieving a deep state of concentration by focusing on breath or reciting mantras;
- *Mozhao* (默照), meaning “silent illumination,” and consisting in becoming aware of the totality of phenomena;
- *Kanhua chan* (看话禪), meaning “observing the phrase meditation,” and consisting in contemplating and reflecting on a single word or sentence.

In order to practice meditation one only needs a quiet, protected place. Therefore, as claimed by scholar Wing-tsit Chan (1901-1994), “the garden is . . . an ideal place for meditation” (2012, p. 35).

In fact, there is a tradition of meditating in secluded spaces in the middle of Nature, as depicted in some of the poems analyzed in paragraph 3.1.5, or in Luo Ping’s (1733-1799) painting *The Sleeping Monk – Meditation Pavilion in a Bamboo Grove* (fig. 3.1.f). In this work, the image represents a monk sitting inside a small building, with large openings (door and windows) on the side that faces the viewer. Around it, several clumps of bamboo.

The inscription that accompanies the painting contains the following couplet:

Paper windows, bamboo roof – rooms sheltered and warm;
In coarse robes they doze on round rush mats. (as cited in Berger & Spencer, 1994,
p. 451)

Again, the artists remarks that a place for meditation only needs to be a shelter that protects from the cold weather and contain a mat on which to sit.

A practice somehow related to meditation is that of *weiqi* (Chinese chess): through it, scholars could “enter the realm of reclusive landscapes by way of a virtual tour, and . . . exchange philosophies in a speechless way like the ‘metaphysical conversation’ or the ‘silent conversation’” (Yi Wang, 2015, p. 130). Considered one of the “four arts,” together with *qin*,¹ calligraphy and painting, *weiqi* was an important part of literati garden culture. As seen in Qian Gu’s (1508-1578) *A Chess Game in a Bamboo Hut* (fig. 3.1.g), scholars used to play this game during their gatherings in the gardens. Like meditation, this activity requires concentration, and plants can help in achieving the right mental state. The first verses of the poem that accompanies the painting explicitly mention bamboo as one of the species that can play a role in this:

Bamboo is cool, and pine is green while vast are waves;
The natural sound of four eaves whizzes. (as cited in Yi Wang, 2015, pp. 130-131)

3.1.8 The Gather Emptiness Study

The Gather Emptiness Study is a two-story building with three bays. All its details have been designed in order to make it a perfect place for practicing meditation, starting from its name. “Gather Emptiness,” in fact, is a reference to a passage from the *Zhuangzi*: “The Dao gathers in emptiness – emptiness: the fasting of the mind” (2019, ch. 4). The meaning of these words is that, to achieve a state of peace and merge with the Dao, one has to empty his mind, purging it from distracting thoughts and keeping it clear and pure. The importance of the concept of “void” in Chinese culture has already been highlighted in paragraphs 2.6.7 and 2.6.8.

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the requirements for a place where to practice meditation are very simple: it should be a secluded, quiet shelter that allows one to sit in tranquility and focus on his own mind or on the contemplation of Nature. It is for this reason that the Gather Emptiness Study has been placed in the norther part of the garden, that is quieter and thus dedicated to intellectual activities. To avoid undesired distractions, the study and the adjacent courtyard are somehow isolated from the network of paths and

¹ *Qin*, also known as “Chinese ancient zither,” is a musical instrument with seven strings. For more information, see paragraph 3.3.7.

passages: when moving through the garden, the visitor is brought to circumvent these elements rather than cross them. Besides, there are three elements that contribute to creating the ideal environment for meditating: the bamboos in front of the study, the moon-gate in the courtyard, and the paintings hung inside the building.

Firstly, the two clumps of bamboo will be examined. Their position respects their growth requirements: they have been placed in full sun and are protected from the wind. Their features interact with the Gather Emptiness Study in a variety of ways. With their hollow stems, the bamboos remark the concept of emptiness expressed in the building's name. Their multiple symbolic meanings and their role in Confucian and Daoist thought make them a strong moral example of self-development. Their associations with cranes, phoenixes and the Immortals allow them to be a catalyst for joining the flow of the Universe. The sounds their leaves produce with wind, rain or dew convey peace and tranquility. The arrangement of these plants, near the entrance of the Gather Emptiness Study, can be traced back to the long tradition of pavilions surrounded by a bamboo grove, where a recluse would live and meditate. Here, the grove has been reduced to two clumps, losing its function of completely isolating the building from the rest of the world. The symbolic value, however, is maintained, and the plants act as a threshold that announces to the visitor that he is entering a special place.

This is also a function of the moon-gate in the courtyard: as one crosses it, he becomes aware that he is entering a different world. On the other hand, from the point of view of who is inside the study, the perfect circle of this peculiar door enhances concentration and frames a view of the Rosy Cloud Pool and the Cloud Ridge, water and mountain, *yin* and *yang*.

Finally, the paintings are one of the few elements of furniture or decoration that we find inside the Gather Emptiness Study. They belong to the tradition of ink bamboo painting and have two functions: on one hand, they convey feelings of tranquility, freedom and interior harmony; on the other, they create the illusion, for who is meditating in the study, of being in the middle of Nature, surrounded by a bamboo grove, a combination of the real plants in the courtyard and the painted ones on the walls.

As demonstrated in the following sections, the complexity that is found in the Gather Emptiness Study actually permeates every part of the Master of Nets Garden, establishing an intricate web of relations and interactions between plants, space and life.



Fig. 3.1.h The Gather Emptiness Study as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



Fig. 3.1.i Bamboo clump in front of the Gather Emptiness Study.



Fig. 3.1.k Plan of the Gather Emptiness Study and its surroundings.

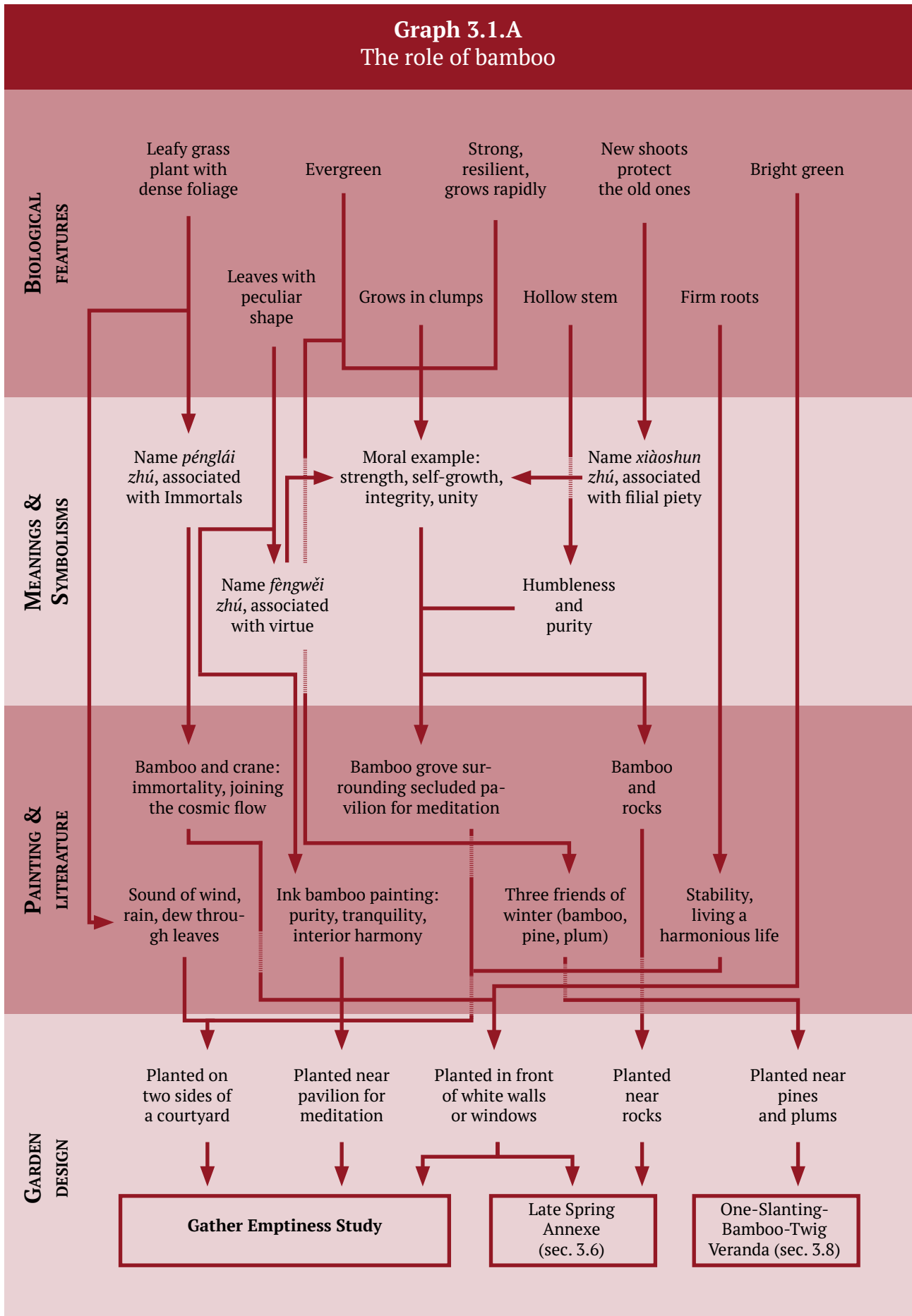


Fig. 3.1.j Moon-gate in front of the Gather Emptiness Study.



Fig. 3.1.l Bamboo painting in the Gather Emptiness Study.

Graph 3.1.A
The role of bamboo



3.2 THE SMALL-HILL-OSMANTHUS-GROVE VERANDA AND THE ROLE OF OSMANTHUS

The second section of the Master of Nets Garden that will be analyzed is the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda, a pavilion for entertaining guests, located in the southern part of the garden. It is surrounded by several osmanthus trees, bamboos and rocks. In the following paragraphs, the significance of osmanthus trees in Chinese culture will be studied, as well as its relationship with the space of the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda and the feasts and gatherings held in the garden.

3.2.1 Osmanthus: biology and history

Osmanthus fragrans is an evergreen broadleaf shrub or tree, belonging to the family *Oleaceae*.¹ It is commonly known as “osmanthus” or “sweet olive.” The exact distribution area of this species is difficult to determine, but historical literature evidence proves that it is an indigenous plant of Southern China (Yan & Zhang, 2006, p. 40). Only with the Ming dynasty it began to spread in rest of the country.

Osmanthuses can grow up to 3 to 12 meters of height. Their bark is smooth, its color grey-brown. The leaves are 7 to 15 centimeters long and 2 to 5 centimeters broad, with an entire or serrulate margin. In late summer and autumn, osmanthuses produce small fragrant tubular flowers that grow in clusters and can be white, yellow or orange-yellow. Six months later, in spring, their purple-black drupe fruit matures. This species usually grows in full sun or partial shade and requires protection from cold winds.

The earliest record about the planting of osmanthuses dates to 140-88 BCE (Yan & Zhang, 2006, p. 41). It was in the royal palace Shanglin Yuan that several species were cultivated as ornamental plants for the first time. The presence of osmanthus in the royal palace’s garden made the plant very popular throughout China: it began to appear in private gardens as well as in temples, while poems, novels and myths enhanced its rich symbolic and cultural connotation. Osmanthuses were grown not only for decorative purposes: their flowers could be used for making cakes, soups, tea, wine and perfumes, while other parts of this plant were valued for their important medicinal properties.

3.2.2 Osmanthus: meaning of the name

In China, *Osmanthus fragrans* is commonly known as *guì* (桂) or *guìhuā* (桂花). *Guì* (桂)

¹ The family *Oleaceae* includes around 700 species of flowering plants, among which there are olive, ash and jasmine.

identifies, besides the osmanthus, also the cinnamon tree, the cassia tree and the laurel.¹ *Huā* means “flower, blossom, bloom.” *Guì* (桂) has a homophonous relationship with *guì* (贵), that means “expensive, noble, valuable.” For this reason, osmanthus are associated with wealth, nobility and prosperity.

This plant is also known as *jiǔlǐ xiāng* (九里香), “fragrant-for-nine-li,”² because of the strong scent of its flowers.

3.2.3 Osmanthus: symbolism

As osmanthus blossom in the eighth lunar month of the Chinese calendar, this month is called *guì yuè* (桂月), the “osmanthus month.” It is the time when Chinese imperial exams were held (sometimes in Suzhou). For this reason, in late imperial China, osmanthus was associated with the examinations. The *chengyu*³ “plucking osmanthus in the Toad Palace”⁴ (蟾宫折桂, *chángōng zhé guì*) means “passing the exam,” and the few scholars who got the highest honors were awarded with a “crown of osmanthus.” This demonstrates that osmanthus was considered a symbol of success and honor.

Osmanthus is associated to many lunar legends, as it blooms at the time when the Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated. In fact, this event is also called “Osmanthus Festival.” It is held on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, with a full moon. In this day, the moon is said to be brightest and roundest, which signifies gathering and family reunion.

The origin of the Mid-Autumn festival is explained by a series of myths. The legend of the Moon Palace tells that, in ancient times, the Jade Emperor used to offer sacrifices to the moon every autumn. Once, he was visited by a Daoist priest who invited him to visit the Moon Palace. Next to its gate, there was a huge osmanthus tree. Under it, a Jade Rabbit was mixing a, elixir for eternal life, surrounded by hundreds of dancers that offered the emperor delicious cakes shaped like the moon. When he returned to Earth, the Jade Emperor ordered to prepare cakes with that same shape: the “mooncakes.” According to the myth, lunar phases are caused by that huge osmanthus, that over the course of each month grows and loses its leaves and blossoms.

Another tale narrates that, a long time ago, ten suns rose in the sky together, causing

1 This multiplicity of meanings often causes problems and misinterpretations with English translations. In several cases, *guì* is translated as “cassia” or “cinnamon” while in fact the original Chinese text meant “osmanthus.” In many other occasions, the correct translation remains unclear.

2 A *li* is a traditional unit of length, equivalent to approximately 0.5 kilometers.

3 A *chengyu* is a Chinese idiomatic expression usually made of four characters.

4 The Toad Palace is another name for the Moon Palace, a huge building that, according to the myths, is found on the moon and in which there is a tall osmanthus tree. It is called Toad Palace because, according to some versions of the tales, a toad lives there.



■ Fig. 3.2.a After Yun Shouping (1633-1690), *Cassia Tree*, 20.6 x 30.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ Fig. 3.2.b Tang Yun (1910-1993), *Mid-Autumn Festival with Seven Character Couplet*, 1985.



■ Fig. 3.2.c Zhu Baoqi (1880-1950), *Osmanthus*.

hardships to the people on Earth. The hero Hou Yi, an excellent archer, shot down nine of them, leaving just one to provide light. As a reward for this feat, the Jade Emperor gave him the elixir of immortality. Yi didn't want to live in eternity without his beloved wife Chang'e, so he did not drink it and let her keep it. While he was out hunting, however, his treacherous apprentice Peng Meng attacked Chang'e to get the elixir. She refused to give it to him and drank it instead. She then flew up to the sky, and, in order to stay as near as possible to her husband, chose to live on the moon. When he discovered what had happened, Yi displayed in his yard the fruits and cakes that his wife used to like and offered them as sacrifices to her. Chang'e, living a life of solitude in the Moon Palace, asked the Jade Rabbit to produce a magical pill that could allow her to return to Earth. But the animal was busy with producing the elixir for the osmanthus tree and had no time to help her. When people learned of this story, they started to pray Chang'e, who became goddess of the Moon, for luck and safety. Thanks to the association with this myth, osmanthuses are considered a symbol of love, romance and faithfulness.

The Mid-Autumn Festival is an occasion for friends and relatives to meet, eat mooncakes and watch the moon. Osmanthus wine is traditionally chosen as a "reunion wine" to drink during this celebration.

3.2.4 Osmanthus: painting

The representation of osmanthuses in paintings can stimulate evocative thoughts and deep meditations. In *Cassia tree* (fig. 3.2.a), Yun Shouping (1633-1690) explores a wide range of expressive possibilities, embodying much more than just the scent of the flowers.

The tree and its leaves are made with gray and smoky brushworks, and only the clusters of small yellow flowers give color to the composition. This delicacy is reflected by his poems:

On the branches a pristine breath of frost,
Below the tree, sparse and misty moss.
Dense leaves let through the golden wind,
Delicate flowers fall on the empty stairs.
Why must the Dipper Stars become obscured?
I gaze at the Seventh Star through a crystal screen.
Riding the clouds I go up to the Tzu-wei Star,
And from the autumn sky pluck the bright moon. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, p. 85)

For Yun, both images and words are metaphors: the frosted branches are a crystal screen through which we can look at the stars, while the yellow flowers are a golden wind that blows through empty spaces.

The association with the moon recurs often: for example in the inscription contained in *Osmanthus* (fig. 3.2.c), by Zhu Baoqi (1880-1950), where this tree is described as a fairy plant from the Moon that means “a person with vision and ambition as high as the clouds.”

Osmanthus is also represented in the “Four Fortunes”: luck, prosperity, longevity and happiness. The image of happiness is in fact a scholar holding a blossoming osmanthus branch, that symbolizes success in the imperial exams. Moreover, several paintings depict osmanthus as a symbol of the Mid-Autumn festival, representing it along with a rabbit and the moon (fig. 3.2.b).

3.2.5 Osmanthus: literature

As in painting, also in poetry osmanthus plays a crucial role and can stimulate evocative thoughts and deep meditation. An example is “Tune: Partridge in the Sky-sweet Osmanthus” by Li Qingzhao (1084 - c. 1155), written in 1133:

You are so tender, though of pale, light yellow hue;
Far from caress of heart and hand, fragrant are you.
There is no need for crimson or green jade color,
For besides you, there’s no flowers more beautiful (as cited in Wang & Yu, 2017)

This poetry tries to capture the true beauty of osmanthus and its scent. It was written when the poetess stepped out of the room in which she had been locked for over a month.

Moreover, osmanthus images are often related to the moon, re-establishing once again the connection with the Mid-Autumn Festival, as in “Calling-Bird Brook” by Wang Wei:

Man quiet: sweet osmanthus falls
Night tranquil: the spring mountain empties
The rising moon startles mountain birds
Which call awhile in the spring stream. (Cai & Cui, 2012, poetry n. 56)

3.2.6 Osmanthus: garden design

Traditionally, osmanthuses were planted in soils that contained rich humus, had a sunny exposure and avoided wind. They were cultivated either by planting seeds (usually in in April) or with the pressing twig method. The latter consisted in embedding the shaved twig in the soil in early April. The root would then grow after approximately five months.

Osmanthus was first of all valued for its practical function of providing flowers that could be used for cuisine, medicine, perfuming and hairdressing. The flowers were collected in September: a clean cloth was put around the root, then flowers were collected in the following morning. They were gathered in a stone basin and pestled. Pounded flowers were then

put into a jar, covered with dry lotus leaves, and the jar would be put in well water. Through such preserving methods, osmanthus flowers would be fresh for about one year (Yan & Zhang, 2006, p. 42).

Secondly, osmanthus had an important aesthetic value, due to its rich aroma and its evergreen foliage. As the blossoming period is very short, people gave a great importance to this event, and developed a series of flower appreciation activities. Osmanthus flowers were considered “elegant,” a concept that in Chinese culture included two characteristics: a non-bright color and a fragrant scent.

There were three typical arrangements of this plant in Chinese classical gardens (Zheng et al, 2016, p. 43).

1. *Liangguidangting*: two trees in front of the main court, a very common arrangement in temples and private gardens. It represents spiritual sustenance that is hoped to be inherited for generations.
2. *Jinyumantang*: mixed planting of *Osmanthus fragrans* and *Magnolia denudata*, that symbolizes prosperity.
3. *Yutangchunfugui*: mixed planting of *Osmanthus fragrans*, *Magnolia denudata*, *Malus micromalus*, *Paeonia suffruticosa*, *Jasminum nudiflorum*. This arrangement puts together five auspicious plants, mixing evergreen and deciduous plants.



Fig. 3.2.d Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *The Cassia Grove Studio*, c. 1532, 31.6 x 56.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Besides these three arrangements, osmanthus were also often planted with buildings and stones (fig. 3.2.d). In private literati gardens, sceneries called *Conggui Xuan* (“Osmanthus-Grove Veranda”) or *Xiaoshan Conggui* (“Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove”) were very common. They were inspired by a verse in “Summons for a Gentleman Who Became a Recluse,” written by Huainan Xiaoshan in the *Songs of the South*: “the cassia trees grow thick in the mountain’s recesses” (as cited in Yi Wang, 2015, p. 17). Garden owners chose this reference as a metaphor of noble character and reclusive sentiments. By the 17th century, this reference had become so spread and obvious that Wen Zhenheng stated that a pavilion surrounded by osmanthus trees “cannot be labeled with such phrases as ‘heavenly fragrance’ and ‘small hill’” (2019, p. 39).

Other suggestions that Wen Zhenheng gave in his treaty include dedicating a space of two *mu*¹ to osmanthus trees with a pavilion amongst them and having a flat ground around those trees, so that it would be easy to collect the blossoms.

In any case, a general principle that was followed in every arrangement of osmanthus was to plant them in enclosed spaces, so that their scent would not be dispersed.

3.2.7 Feasts and gatherings in Chinese classical gardens

Feasts, banquets, parties and gatherings were one of the main activities performed in Chinese classical gardens, and have been depicted in countless paintings, poetries and novels. One example is *Drinking in the Bamboo Garden*, by Luo Ping. Here, the artist represents quite realistically an actual gathering to which he had participated: a group of scholars can be seen drinking together inside a pavilion, surrounded by bamboo and trees.

The same atmosphere is described in “The Small Garden,” a poem written by Luo Ping’s friend Zheng Xie (1693-1765):

Moonlight, harsh and clear, floods in the high pavilion.
The night still young, the wicket gate is half open.
A lantern moving among trees announces the guest’s arrival.
Smoke rises from the bamboos in answer to my call for tea.
The dog barks now and then at the falling of autumn’s star.
Gusts of wind disperse the sad sounds of a distant flute.
Rapt in talk, we sit till the dawn slowly comes up,
As brightly colored clouds and cool dew overspread the green moss. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, pp. 118-121)

The activities listed by Zheng Xie in his verses – drinking tea (cf. paragraph 3.8.11), listening and playing music (cf. paragraph 3.3.7), and having conversations – are only some of

1 A *mu* is a traditional unit of surface, corresponding to about 1334 m².

the several pastimes of Chinese literati. In their “elegant gatherings,” or *yaji* (雅集), scholars would also play chess (cf. paragraph 3.1.7), examine cultural artifacts (cf. paragraph 3.4.9), paint, practice calligraphy (cf. paragraph 3.5.8), burn incense, appreciate flowers (cf. paragraph 3.6.7), have poetry contests and play drinking games.

The most famous *yaji* in history was the so-called “Orchid Pavilion Gathering,” which took place on the third day of the third month of the year 353 in Kuaiji, Zhejiang. Some of the most renowned poets, painters and calligraphers of the time gathered to compose poems and enjoy *huangjiu* (yellow wine). These gentlemen played *liúshāng* (流觴), “floating goblets”: they sat on the bank of a small stream in which cups full of wine were floated and, whenever one of the cups stopped, the nearest man had to drink all of its content or compose a poem.

In Chinese tradition, in fact, there was a close relationship between alcohol consumption and poetic inspiration (Grant, 2013, p. 127). The poet Li Bai (701-762), for example, was famous for his love of wine, to which he dedicated several of his poems. One of them is “Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon”:

Among the blossoms, a single jar of wine.
No one else here, I ladle it out myself.
Raising my cup, I toast the bright moon,
and facing my shadow makes friends three,
though moon has never understood wine,
and shadow only trails along behind me.

...

I hear clear wine called enlightenment,
and they say murky wine is like wisdom:
once you drink enlightenment and wisdom,
why go searching for gods and immortals?
Three cups and I’ve plumbed the great Way,
a jarful and I’ve merged with occurrence
appearing of itself. Wine’s view is lived:
you can’t preach doctrine to the sober.

...

and once I’m drunk, all heaven and earth
vanish, leaving me suddenly alone in bed,
forgetting that person I am even exists.

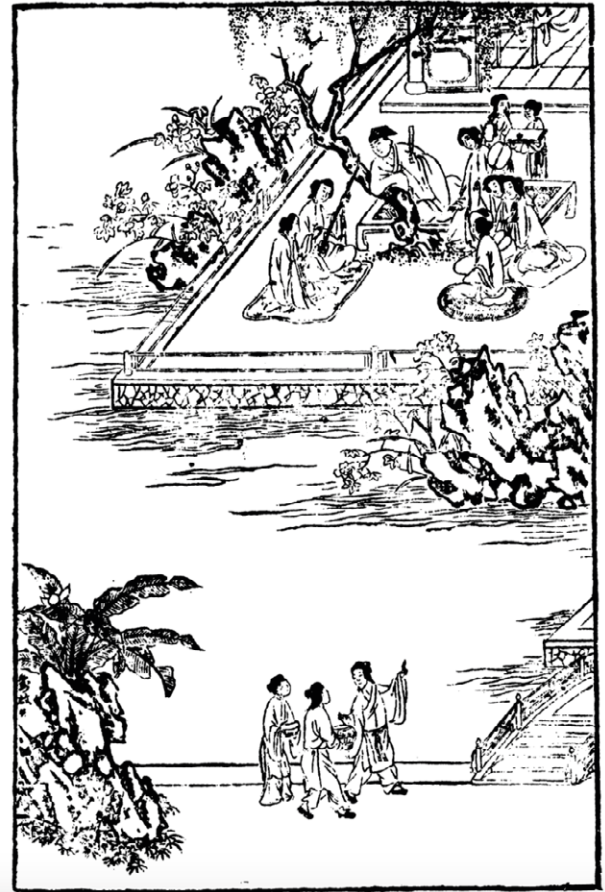
Of all our joys, this must be the deepest. (Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon, 2020)

Here, wine becomes not only a catalyst for artistic inspiration, but a means to achieve transcendence and experience the pure joy of unity with the Universe. The importance of alcohol in literati gatherings, therefore, should not be underestimated.

Besides *yaji*, however, banquets and feasts were also held with the garden owner’s family



■ **Fig. 3.2.e** Luo Ping (1733-1799), *Drinking in the Bamboo Garden*, 1773, 80 x 54.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.2.f** Woodcut illustration from the 10th chapter of the *Jin Ping Mei*.



■ **Fig. 3.2.g** Detail of unidentified artist, *Gathering at the Orchid Pavilion*, 16th century, 29.2 x 29.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

or guests, as moments of celebration and socialization. A description of such event can be read in the 10th chapter of the erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei* (“The Golden Lotus”), written by Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng during the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), in which the protagonist, Ximen Qing, has a banquet set up in his garden for himself and his wives:

He gave orders to Laiwang, Lai Po, and Laixing to make preparations in the garden. They set up folding screens and arranged embroidered hangings in the Hibiscus Arbor; a banquet was prepared, and a band of musicians engaged to sing and dance. . . . Ximen Qing and Yueniang sat in the place of honor, and the other ladies arranged themselves according to their position in the household. As they passed the cups from one to the other, they seemed as full of grace as the flowers of a posy or the pattern upon a piece of brocade. (1610/2011, vol. 1, p. 141)

This text and the related illustration show how the space of the garden was arranged when feasts and banquets were held. Screens and partitions were used to define and decorate the space, and seats were placed for the distinguished hosts and guests, while less important participants would sit on mats. The location of the banquet was often chosen depending on which plants were blooming in that particular moment, and music and wine always played an important role.

In fact, drinking games were not only popular among scholars, but were also played in other social contexts. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, for example, during a feast the characters play “Gong Show.” In this game, one of the participants beats a gong while the other ones sit in a circle and pass a flower to each other. Whenever the gong player stops beating, the person who holds the flower in his hand has to drink.

3.2.8 The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda

The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda is a three-bay building with a portico on three sides. As it is a place dedicated to the entertainment of guests, it has been placed in the southern part of the garden, the one where social activities were performed, and it is easily accessible from the Sedan Hall and the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall, the public parts of the residence.

Because of its position and function, the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda had the crucial role of displaying to all the guests the wealth and virtue of the garden owner. In fact, the reference to Huainan Xiaoshan’s “Summons for a Gentleman Who Became a Recluse” that characterizes this building’s name (and that has been explained in paragraph 3.2.6) achieves at the same time two goals: it expresses the desire of living as a recluse in the middle of Nature and it symbolizes nobility and honor. Both aspects will be examined.

Firstly, the theme of this building is that of appearing as a recluse’s shelter in a thick os-

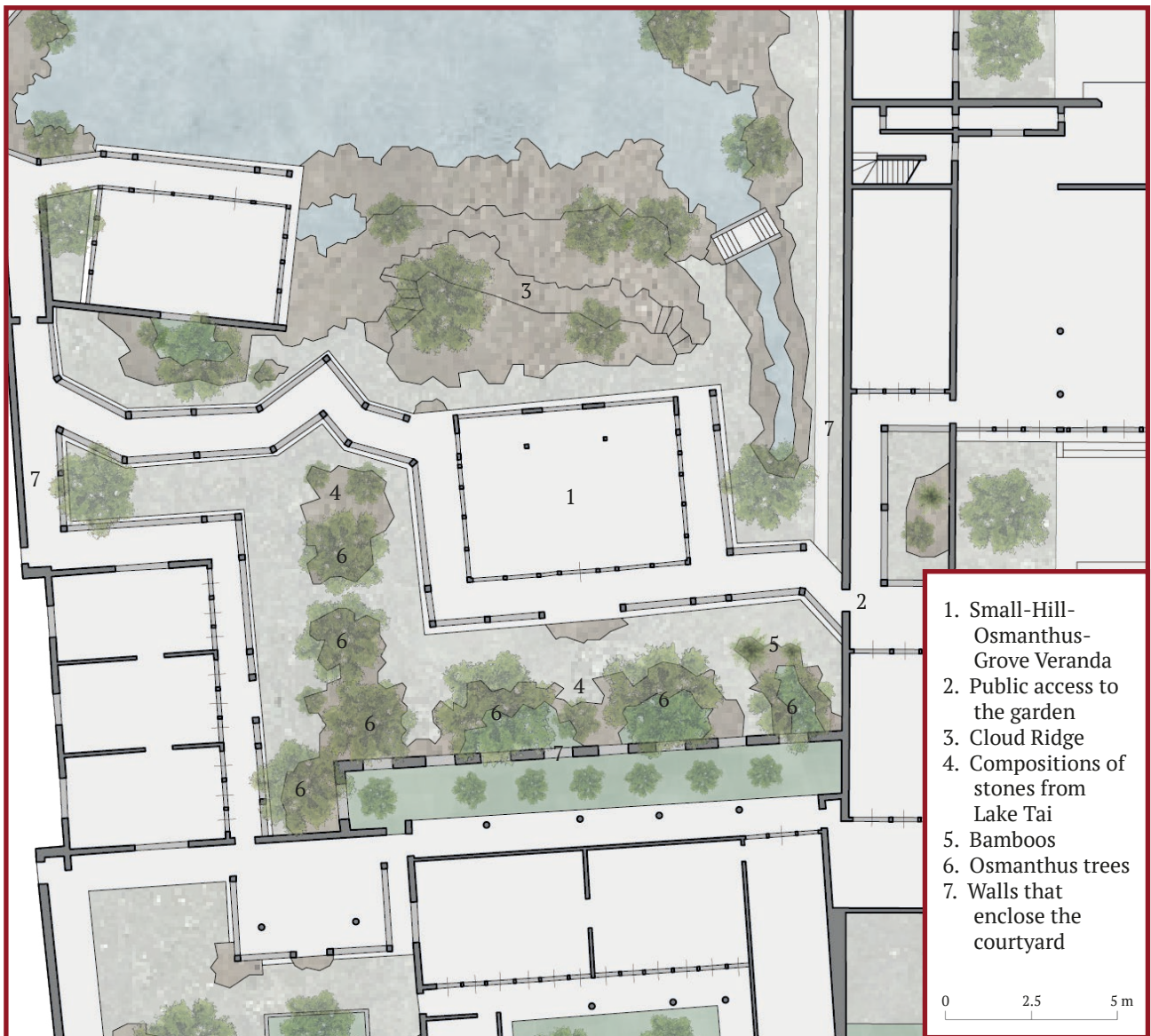


Fig. 3.2.h Plan of the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda and its surroundings.



Fig. 3.2.i The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda as depicted in the Sedan Hall.

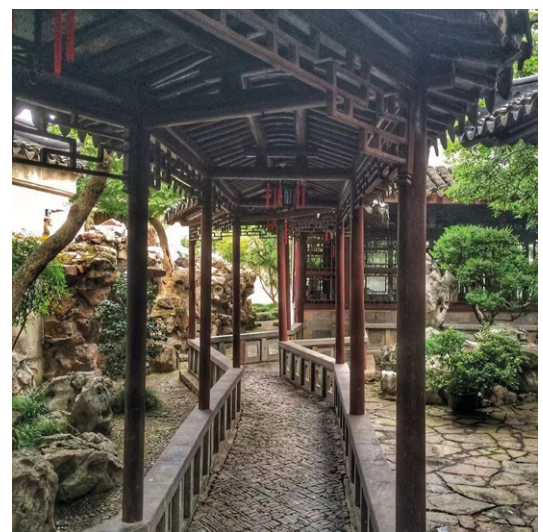


Fig. 3.2.j The gallery that leads to the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.

manthus grove located “in the mountain’s recesses.” In order to give this impression to the visitors and guests who would stay inside the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove* Veranda, the building has been located right to the south of the Cloud Ridge, a big rockery that resembles a mountain, while on the opposite side a composition of exquisite stones completes the picture. All around, bamboos and osmanthus create a sort of forest (figs. 3.2.1-p). As all the sides of the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove* Veranda consist of elegant latticed wooden screens, the building is almost completely transparent, allowing who is inside to be surrounded by rocks and plants, as if he really was in a deep valley (figs. 3.2.s-v). This whole composition creates a peaceful environment where one can contemplate Nature and cultivate his virtues.

On the other hand, the choice of osmanthus as the main plant for this section of the garden has also other reasons. As a symbol of nobility and wealth, it shows to guests and visitors the prosperity of their host and his family. Its association with imperial examinations represents the honor, ambition and culture of the garden owner. These meanings are reinforced by the presence of bamboos and rocks, other symbols of a gentleman’s virtues. Moreover, the connection between osmanthus and the Mid-Autumn Festival makes it an ideal plant for a place where people would gather and celebrate feasts and banquets.

To make the most of the biological features of osmanthus, the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove* Veranda has been placed in an enclosed space, surrounded by walls on three sides and the Cloud Ridge on the fourth. Thanks to this disposition, osmanthus have the perfect environment for their growth, getting sunlight while being protected from the wind, and the strong fragrance of their flowers is not dispersed, but it is instead kept within the limits of this area, so that it flows through the latticed screens of the building and it fills the interior. For this reason, autumn is the best season for enjoying the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove* Veranda, but the fact that osmanthus (and bamboos) are evergreen plants makes the space pleasant during the whole year.

On a final note, it can be observed that the function of osmanthus in this instance is purely aesthetic rather than utilitarian. The space around the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus-Grove* Veranda, in fact, is not designed to facilitate the collection of a large number of blossoms, as there is no flat, empty ground, but a series of rockeries and plants, exactly the opposite of what Wen Zhenheng suggested in his treaty.



■ **Fig. 3.2.k** The gallery that leads to the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 3.2.l** The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda, surrounded by rocks and osmanthus trees.



■ **Fig. 3.2.m** The Lake Tai stones and osmanthus trees in front of the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 3.2.n** Stones and trees near the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 3.2.o** The portico that surrounds the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



■ **Fig. 3.2.p** The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda seen from the Tread-Upon-Harmony Lodge.



Fig. 3.2.q The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda seen from the top of the Cloud Ridge.



Fig. 3.2.r The Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda and the Cloud Ridge.



Fig. 3.2.s View from inside the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



Fig. 3.2.t View from inside the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.



Fig. 3.2.u View from inside the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.

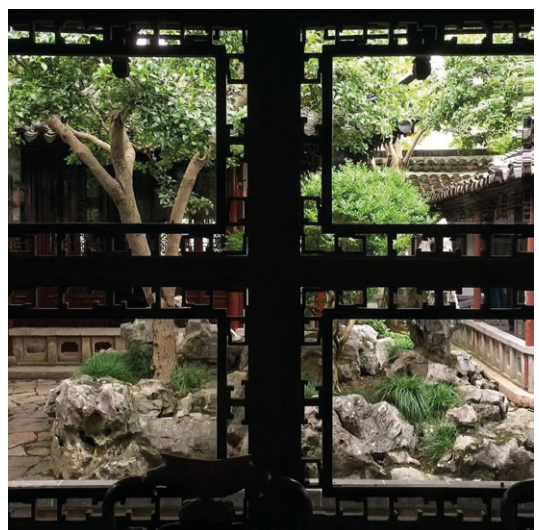
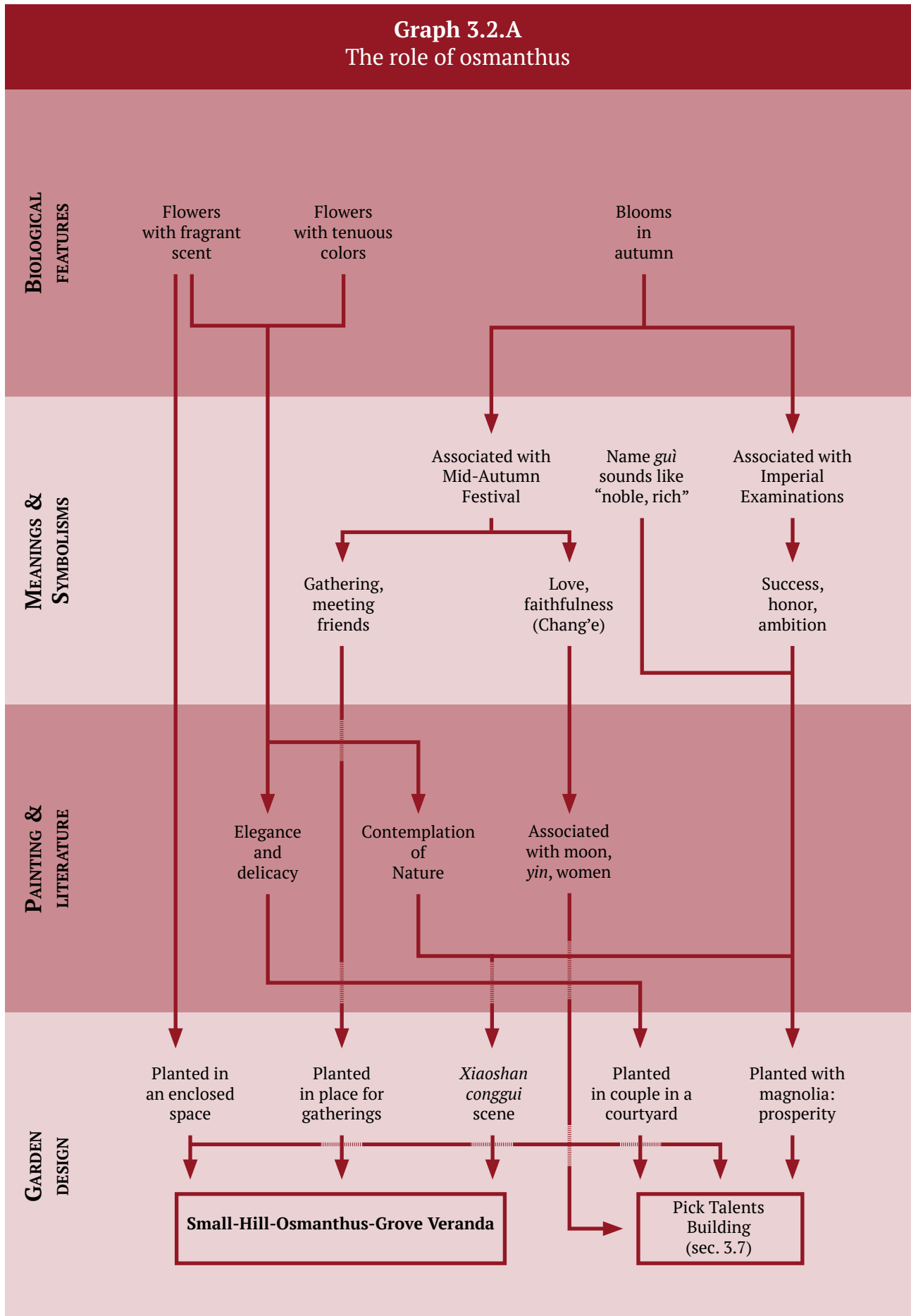


Fig. 3.2.v View from inside the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda.

Graph 3.2.A
The role of osmanthus



3.3 THE ZITHER CHAMBER AND THE ROLE OF POMEGRANATE

The Zither Chamber is located in the southern part of the Master of Nets Garden, near the Small-Hill-*Osmanthus*-Grove Veranda. As suggested by its name, it is a place dedicated to music. In front of it, a pomegranate tree has been grown as a *penjing* in a large stone vase. Behind it, a composition of bamboos and rocks has been placed against a whitewashed wall. In this section, the significance of pomegranate in Chinese culture will be explored, and its relationship with the space of the Zither Chamber and the practice of playing and listening to music will be discussed.

3.3.1 Pomegranate: biology and history

Punica granatum is a deciduous¹ shrub or small tree, belonging to the family *Lythraceae*.² It's commonly known as “pomegranate.” Its native range includes Turkey, the Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia and Northern India. Today, it is widely cultivated all over the world.

Pomegranates can grow between 5 and 10 meters tall. They feature multiple spiny branches. They have oblong leaves, 3 to 7 centimeters long and 2 centimeters wide. The flowers are red, with a diameter of around 3 centimeters. The fruits are red-purple, with sizes that vary from being as little as a walnut to bigger than an orange. Their interior is full of seeds, placed in compartments separated by white spongy tissue. These fruits are typically in season between September and February. Pomegranates grow better in hot dry climates, but they can adapt to different circumstances, as long as they are placed in a sheltered sunny position.

This species arrived in China around the 2nd century BCE, during the Han Dynasty. It was probably brought by the diplomat Zhang Qian (d. 114 BCE) or, perhaps, by traders travelling along the Silk Road or by sea. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907), cultivation of pomegranates reached a peak, as demonstrated by the verse “pomegranate flowers are everywhere” (S. Cao et al., 2015, p. 370). However, during this first period, it was cultivated mostly for ornamental and medicinal purposes. It was only later that its fruit became a popular food (Simoons, 1990, pp. 246-247).

3.3.2 Pomegranate: meaning of the name

Pomegranate's Chinese name is *shíliú* (石榴). It is a short form of the archaic word *ān-shíliú* (安石榴), where *ānshí* (安石) is the Chinese name for the Parthian Empire,³ while *liú*

1 A deciduous plant is one that seasonally sheds its leaves, usually in autumn.

2 The family *Lythraceae* includes around 620 species of herbs, shrubs and trees, among which there are crape myrtles.

3 The Parthian Empire was a political entity existing in Iran from 247 BCE to 224 CE.

(榴) means “pomegranate.” According to Ming Dynasty naturalist Li Shizhen (1518-1593), the character *liú* (榴) is the same as *liú* (瘤), that means “tumor, lump.” (1596/2003, p. 361). In fact, the pomegranate fruits are quite similar to the cancerous outgrowths of the human body. It is also worth noting that *shí* (石) has a homophone, *shì* (世), that means “lifetime, generations.”

3.3.3 Pomegranate: symbolism

Pomegranates, because of their numerous seeds, are considered a symbol of fertility, abundant offspring and continuation of the family. In fact, the Chinese word for “seed,” *zǐ* (子), also means “child.” Because of this, pomegranates are a recurrent image at weddings, being embroidered in pillowcases and other gifts, but also playing an important role at wedding dinners. For the same reason, they are offered to the Goddess of Mercy by women who desire to have children. They are also displayed during funerals, as a symbol of the continuation of the family.

Pomegranates are an important Buddhist symbol, as carriers of positive influences and luck, and they can be often found in the decorations of the temples. Besides, they are associated with the fifth month of the lunar calendar.

3.3.4 Pomegranate: painting

As a symbol of fertility, pomegranates are often depicted in paintings concerned with the themes of “infinite posterity and prosperity.” In this case, they would be represented ripened, with their seeds bursting out, and attracting birds (fig. 3.3.a).

A combination of pomegranates and butterflies (*dié*, 蝶) creates the motif of “repeated” (*dié*, 叠) descendants. Associated to citrons (*xiāngyuán*, 香橼, that sounds like “continuously coming first”), instead, they represent a wish of having children that will have success (children that will always be the first in everything). When pomegranates are depicted inside the mouth of a toad, the meaning is a wish for longevity of the family. Finally, a pomegranate, together with a bat, a peach, and a *ruyi* scepter, is a part of the rebus *san duo jiu ru*, meaning “three abundances and nine similitudes.” The meaning of this formula is prosperity, longevity and infinite posterity. The “three abundances” refer to fortune, symbolized by the bat (whose character *fú*, 蝠, is homophonous with *fú*, 福, “fortune”), longevity, represented by the peach (a traditional symbol of immortality) and male progeny, associated to the pomegranate. The nine similitudes, instead, come from the *Shi Jing* and refer to eternity and longevity.

3.3.5 Pomegranate: literature

In literature, pomegranates appear mostly because of their red flowers, rather than their fruits. They bear a strong association with summer, as recorded by Zhang Zai (fl. c. 290):

Rising in blue-green spring, then it sends forth shoots;
Basking in red summer, then it releases brilliant color. (as cited in Harper, 1986, p. 143)

The brilliant red of the pomegranate flower, in fact, was associated with the strong sun of the summer solstice. But it also represented beautiful women, a recurring theme in poetries from the Six Dynasties period (220-589) and the Tang Dynasty (618-907). For example, a woman's red dancing skirt was called "pomegranate skirt." The comparison was possible not only because of the color, but also because the dress would swirl freely when a woman danced, reminding of the petals of the flower, as described by Thearch Yuan of the Liang (reported 552-554):

Crocodilian dragons formed into brocade combat phoenix patterns;
Lotuses make a belt for the pomegranate skirt. (as cited in Harper, 1986, p. 151)

A similar example can be found in the verses of Wan Chu (fl. c. 730), who described how the beauty of a woman surpassed that of the flowers:

Her eyebrow paint eclipses daylily hues;
The red skirt causes pomegranate flowers to die from envy. (as cited in Harper, 1986, p. 152)

3.3.6 Pomegranate: garden design

The most outstanding trait of the pomegranate consists in its big, bright red fruits and, even more importantly, in its flowers, as remarked by Wen Zhenheng in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*: "The flower of the pomegranate . . . is greater than its fruit" (2019, p. 36). To enhance this characteristic, pomegranates are usually planted near walls with "green windows" (Yu & Wei, 2010, p. 9) or "at the edges of a courtyard" (Wen, 2019, p. 36).

A common practice was to grow them as a *penjing*: this way, its fruits and flowers seemed completely out of proportion, amplifying the auspicious meanings of fertility and prosperity associated to this plant. In particular, this was done in the courtyards of the Imperial Palace, where pomegranate trees were grown in exquisitely decorated vases.

The ancient art of *penjing* was extensively practiced in Chinese gardens and houses (figs. 3.3.b-e). It consists in obtaining "dwarf plants" by pruning the roots of a tree when it is



■ **Fig. 3.3.a** Pomegranates on the back of a pair of 19th century chairs from Shaanxi.



■ **Fig. 3.3.b** *Penjing* in the Yu Garden, in Shanghai.



■ **Fig. 3.3.c** *Penjing* in the Yu Garden, in Shanghai.



■ **Fig. 3.3.d** *Penjing* in the Yu Garden, in Shanghai.



■ **Fig. 3.3.e** *Penjing* in the Yu Garden, in Shanghai.

young, and then forcing its growth inside a vase or tray. The origin of this custom lies in the depictions of miniaturized mountainous islands that represented the Isles of the Immortals. These landscapes were originally formed by rock specimens, a small pool and some dwarf trees. As far as we know, the oldest depiction of this practice dates back to the 8th century and is a painting found in Xi'an, in the tomb of the prince Zhang Huai. In the course of the following centuries, this art became widespread all over China and Japan, and plants became the main protagonists of *penjing*, while rocks and water were often left aside.

3.3.7 Music in Chinese classical gardens

As seen in paragraph 3.2.7, music was always present during feasts and gatherings in gardens. Several paintings depict scenes in which people play musical instruments and dance in Chinese classical gardens. One of them is *Music Playing around the Lotus Pond* (fig. 3.3.g), painted during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). In it, there is a strong sense of harmony with Nature, a “sentiment of inclusive elaborate arrangement and extravagant beauty when garden occupants enjoyed music and dance in such a landscape environment” (Yi Wang, 2015, p. 128).

The favorite musical instrument of Chinese scholars was the *qin*, a kind of zither composed of seven strings and a sound box made of two wooden boards, the upper one concave, and the bottom one flat with two rectangular holes. With a history of more than three thousand years, the *qin* was played by Confucius himself, and Daoists believed that this instrument had magical powers, causing cranes to dance to its sound.

As the sound of the *qin* was not particularly strong, it was usually enhanced by special tables that acted as a second sound box. This was made of stone or bricks, and it was empty inside.

The ideal of the literati was to play the *qin* in the middle of Nature. Such setting, however, would not have provided the best acoustic conditions. Therefore, a common solution was to play it in a garden: in this way, the ideal union with Nature would be preserved, while a controlled environment would have ensured the possibility of appreciating the performance.

Literati used to play this instrument both when they were alone and during “elegant gatherings” with other scholars. Playing the *qin* was considered one of the “four arts,” and its appreciation was believed to be possible only for men of culture. The painting *Listening to the Qin* (fig. 3.3.f) by Zhao Ji (1082-1135) shows the host playing the *qin* in a deep state of concentration and his two guests listening, completely absorbed by the melody.

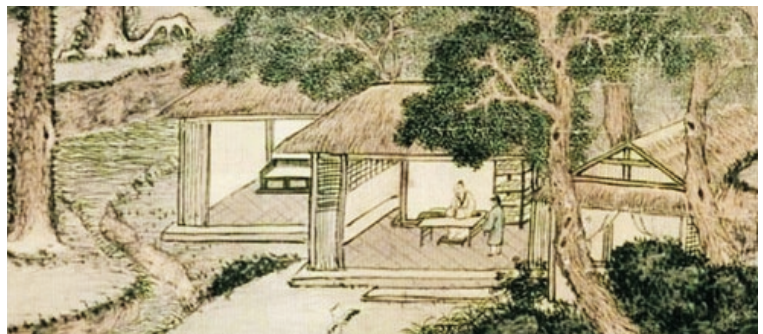
Chinese classical gardens often feature pavilions designed specifically for playing the *qin*, small buildings that acted as resonating chambers. Wen Zhenheng gives precise indi-



■ Fig. 3.3.f Zhao Ji (1082-1135), *Listening to the Qin*, 147.2 x 51.3, Palace Museum, Beijing.



■ Fig. 3.3.g Unidentified artist, *Music Playing around the Lotus Pond*, Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).



■ Fig. 3.3.h Detail of Wang Meng (1308-1385), *Lofty Recluses in Mountains and Valleys*, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



■ Fig. 3.3.i Tang Yin (1470-1524), *Scholar Playing the Guqin*, 29.2 x 197.5 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

cations on how these structures should be used: one has to play the *qin* “at the bottom of a building where the board ceiling prevents the sound from dispersing and concentrates it in the broad space below so that the music sounds strongly” (2019, p. 26).

For the scholars that owned the gardens, playing the *qin* had a double significance: on one hand, it was a spiritual activity of self-cultivation, while on the other it was a powerful symbol of their social status and their intellectual abilities. These aspects are represented respectively by Wang Meng’s (1308-1385) painting *Lofty Recluses in Mountains and Valleys* (fig. 3.3.h) and by Tang Yin’s (1470-1524) *Scholar Playing the Guqin* (fig. 3.3.i).

The former depicts a recluse scholar in a secluded valley, with his *qin* and a crane, symbol of immortality. The natural setting and the presence of books as the only objects owned by the scholar all contribute to convey a sense of peace and spirituality. In Tang Yin’s work, instead, we can see the *qin* player in an elegant garden setting, surrounded by luxurious items, such as teapots, incense burners and tools for painting and calligraphy. In this case, the aim of the painting is to show the refined lifestyle of the *qin* player.

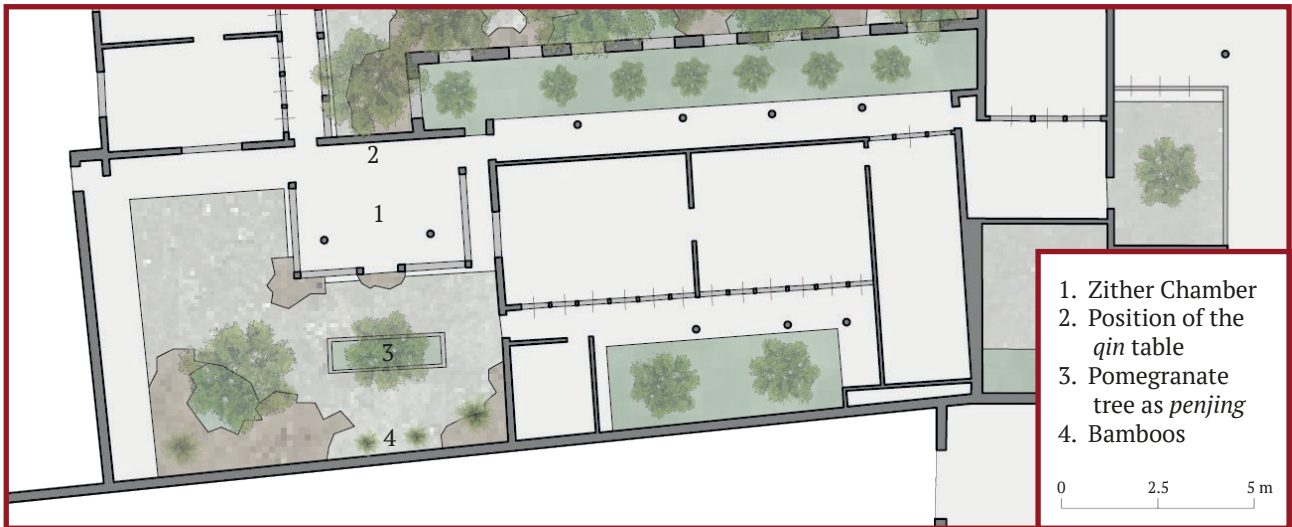
Music is an essential element of Chinese culture. In Confucian thought, the concept of *shi* (诗), intended as poetry accompanied by music, singing and dancing, is “a mode through which primordial human beings communicate and coordinate with their natural and social worlds, and is therefore fundamental to authentic dwelling” (Zhuang, 2012, p. 373). When performed in a group, *shi* acts as a catalyst for social relationship, strengthening the sense of community and establishing a connection with shared traditions and history.

Music is also a powerful means to connect Humankind and Nature. Artificial and natural sounds are considered to have the same aesthetic value, to take part in the same cosmic rhythm. In the *Lie Zi*, written by Lie Yukou (450-374 BCE), the sound of the *qin* is compared to that of flowing water (Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 176). A Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet described the merging of music and landscape that he achieved when playing the *qin* in his garden:

Musical harmony and cosmic harmony are one and the same. This concept can be found in the Yue Ji (“Record of Music”):

The melody of music echoes each other, changeable but still integral. The activity of the universe follows the same harmony and embraces its own rhyme; the universe and music are connecting and echoing each other. (as cited in Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 176)

Listening and playing music in a Chinese classical garden, therefore, was yet another way to merge with Nature and join the cosmic flow.



■ Fig. 3.3.j Plan of the Zither Chamber and its surroundings.



■ Fig. 3.3.k The Zither Chamber and its courtyard.



■ Fig. 3.3.l The *qin* table in the Zither Chamber.



■ Fig. 3.3.m The pomegranate tree in front of the Zither Chamber and its red fruits.



■ Fig. 3.3.n The Zither Chamber, a pomegranate tree, bamboos and a white wall.

3.3.8 The Zither Chamber

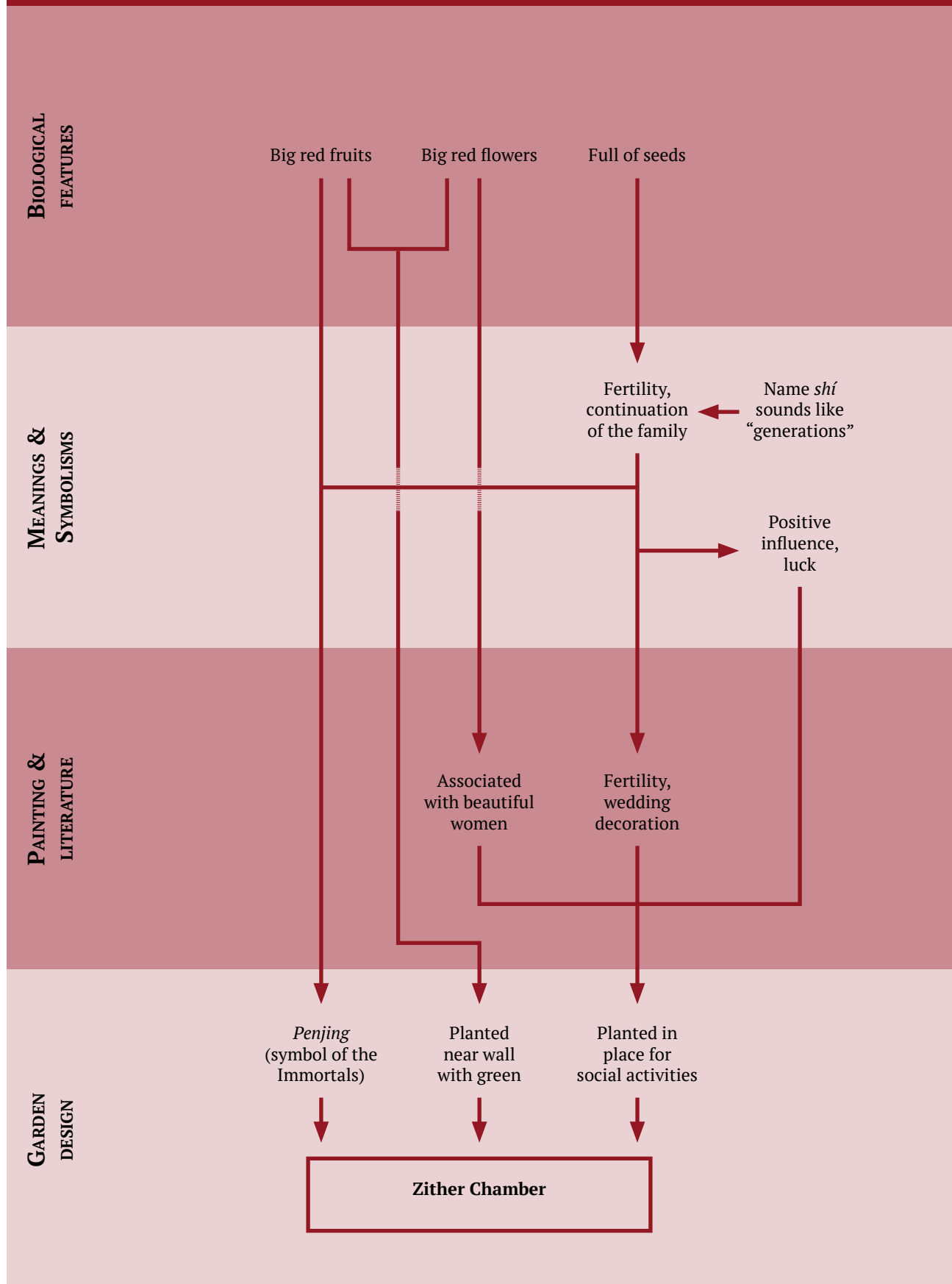
The Zither Chamber is a square three-bay building that was used to play the *qin* and to held performances. It is located in the southern part of the garden, dedicated to social activities, and can be easily reached from the Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda, making it a perfect place for entertaining guests with music and performances after a banquet.

Its space has been carefully designed in order to enhance the sound of the *qin*: the building, where the player would stay, is completely open on two sides, establishing a strong relationship with the exterior, where the audience would sit (fig. 3.3.k). The courtyard is small and enclosed by walls on all sides, so that the music does not disperse. A *qin* table, made of stone, is positioned in the Zither Chamber, near the northern wall (fig. 3.3.l). The cavity inside this table, combined with another one located inside the brickwork of the adjacent wall, amplifies the feeble sound of the *qin*.

Playing the *qin* was an activity that could be performed either alone, almost as a form of meditation, or during a gathering. The position of the Zither Chamber, near other spaces dedicated to the entertainment of guests, and the presence of a pomegranate tree in its courtyard, suggest that in the Master of Nets Garden music played a social role rather than a purely intellectual one. The meanings and association of pomegranates seem much more suitable for a gathering than for a lonely contemplation of Nature. The association of this plant with fertility, continuation of the family, good luck and beautiful women displays the prosperity of the garden owner, and at the same time represents a wish of good fortune for guests and visitors. These meanings are amplified by the fact that the pomegranate tree of the Zither Chamber has been grown as a *penjing*, making its fruits and flowers look much bigger than they actually are and reminding of the courtyards of the Imperial Palace (fig. 3.3.m). The position of the plant grants it sunlight and protection from the wind.

As a *penjing*, the pomegranate of the Zither Chamber is also a symbol of the Isles of the Immortals. As seen in paragraph 3.3.7, Daoists associate the music of the *qin* to cranes, another symbol of immortality: therefore, the Zither Chamber and its courtyard can be interpreted as a space where the garden owner and its guests can transcend the finitude of their mortal lives and, through music, become a part of the melodious harmony of the Universe. This is enhanced by the rocks and bamboos behind the pomegranate tree: according to some legends, their arrangement, that recalls the Isles of the Immortals, has been designed by the famous garden designer Ge Yuliang (late 18th century). This composition is set against a whitewashed wall, that acts as an abstract plane, evoking a sense of infinity. On top of this, the presence of several bamboos contributes to creating a green background against which the red fruits and flowers of the pomegranate look brighter and more beautiful (fig. 3.3.n).

Graph 3.3.A
The role of pomegranate



3.4 THE WATCH-PINES-APPRECIATE-PAINTINGS VERANDA AND THE ROLE OF PINE

The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda is the main building in the Master of Nets Garden. Located in the northern part of the garden, it is a place dedicated to the appreciation of artistic and cultural artifacts. In front of it, several pines, a juniper and a camellia have been planted. In this section, the significance of the pine in Chinese culture will be explored, as well as that of the juniper and the camellia. The relationship of these plants with the space of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda and the activity of art appreciation will be discussed.

3.4.1 Pine: biology

Pines are coniferous¹ trees. They constitute the genus *Pinus*, which belongs to the family *Pinaceae*.²

The pines that can be found in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda belong to the species *Pinus thunbergii* and *Pinus bungeana*.

Pinus thunbergii is commonly known as “black pine” or “Japanese black pine.” Its natural range includes Japan’s and South Korea’s coastal regions. It can grow up to 40 meters tall. Its bark is dark gray and scaly; its needles are in fascicles of two, 7 to 12 centimeters long. Pollen cones are 1 to 2 centimeters long, of a yellow-brown color, and grow in clumps. Seed cones are 4 to 7 centimeters long, of a yellow-brown or brown-grey color, and open in late winter. *Pinus thunbergii* usually grows in full sun, tolerating some afternoon shade.

Pinus bungeana is commonly known as “Bunge’s pine” or “lacebark pine.” It is native to northern and central China. It can grow up to 30 meters tall. Its distinctive feature is its grey-green bark, that gradually sheds to reveal pale yellow patches, which, exposed to light, can turn to brown, red or purple. Its peeling plates are especially notable after rains, when their contrasting colors are emphasized. Its needles are in fascicles of three, 5 to 8 centimeters long, and grow sparsely. Seed cones are ovoid shaped, 5 to 7 centimeters long. *Pinus bungeana* usually grows in full sun.

Another species that is generally referred to as “pine” and can be found in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda is *Podocarpus macrophyllus*. It is a coniferous tree, belonging to the family *Podocarpaceae*.³ It is commonly known as “yew plum pine” or

1 A conifer is an evergreen tree that produces oval fruits called “cones.”

2 The family *Pinaceae* is the largest conifer family in species diversity, with around 220-250 species, including spruces, firs, cedars and larches.

3 The family *Podocarpaceae* includes around 125-165 species.

“Buddhist pine.” Its natural range includes southern China and Japan. It can grow up to 20 meters tall. Its leaves are strap-shaped, 6 to 12 centimeters long and 1 centimeter broad. The cones have 2 to 4 scales, with seeds 10 to 15 millimeters long. When mature, the cones become purple-red and berry-shaped. *Podocarpus macrophyllus* usually grows in full sun or partial shade.

3.4.2 Pine: meaning of the name

Pinus thunbergii's Chinese name is *hēisōng* (黑松). *Hēi* (黑) means “black, dark,” while *sōng* (松) means “pine.” The character *sōng* (松) is composed of *gong* (公), that means “fair, equitable, public,” and the radical *mù* (木), meaning “tree, timber, wood.”

Pinus bungeana's Chinese name is *bái pí sōng* (白皮松). *Bái* (白) means “white, clear, pure,” while *pí* (皮) means “skin, leather, cover, surface.”

Podocarpus macrophyllus's Chinese name is *luó hàn sōng* (羅漢松). *Luó hàn* (羅漢) means “arhat,” that is a perfected person who has achieved nirvana. It is composed of *luó* (羅), meaning “net for catching birds, sieve,” and *hàn* (漢), meaning “man.”

3.4.3 Pine: symbolism

Pines are an omnipresent feature of Chinese landscape: it is logical that they have an important role in Chinese culture. They are a symbol of longevity, solitude and steadfastness. For this reason, they are usually planted near graves.

Pines represent the Confucian personality, upholding moral principles. Confucian scholars were supposed to maintain their principles even in adversities, in the same way as pines kept their needles green even in winter. The symbolic importance of this tree must not be underestimated: according to Edwin T. Morris, “the pine was as powerful a symbol for the Chinese as the crucifix for the Western world” (1983, p. 168). Pines are important also in Daoism: as the poet Qian Qi (710-782) wrote, “Daoist hearts are born beneath pines” (as cited in Yi Wang, 2015, p. 109). Besides, the *Zhuangzi* reads: “Of things that are commanded to life . . . by the earth only the pine and cypress carry out their commands aright, that is why they stay green summer and winter” (2019, ch. 5). Daoists who desired to achieve immortality used to eat pinecones, pine resin and pine needles.

Pine and cypress together represent the motto “as long a life as the pine and the cypress.” They both represent longevity, and are mentioned in Confucius's *Analects*: “Only in the deepest winter do we realize that the pine and the cypress are the last to shed their leaves” (2014, 9.28).

When depicted with a crane, pines symbolize a long and peaceful life. According to Chi-

nese tradition, in fact, cranes live for centuries. A depiction of a crane with a pine or cypress and the sun is a typical New Year painting. It is also common on gifts and birthday cards. The Chinese God of Longevity, Shouxing, is usually represented standing under a pine tree with a crane on its branches.

3.4.4 Pine: painting

The pine is perhaps the most frequently painted tree in Chinese art, to the point of becoming a genre in itself (Sullivan, 1962, p. 141). This is not only because of its moral and literary associations, but also its shape: it was ideal for displaying virtuosity with the brush. Landscape painter and theorist Jing Hao (855-915), in his essay *Bifa Ji* wrote:

The true nature of a pine tree is as follows: it may grow curved, but never appear deformed and crooked. . . . Even as a tiny sapling it stands upright and aims to grow high, thus already showing its posture of independence and nobility. Even when its branches grow low, sideways or downwards, it never falls to the ground. . . . [Its branches] are like the breeze of the virtuous [which passes over the bowed heads of the humbly respected]. (as cited in Sullivan, 1962, p. 142)

In paintings, it is common to find traditional associations such as pine and crane (fig. 3.4.a), or pine and cypress. To express the sentence “as long-living as pine and cypress” (*song bai tong chun*), artists would sometimes also represent, besides pine (*song*) and cypress (*bai*) the last two words of the expression with homophonic trees: the Chinese parasol (*tong*) and the Chinese toon or mahogany (*chun*; Cheng et al., 2018, p. 265).

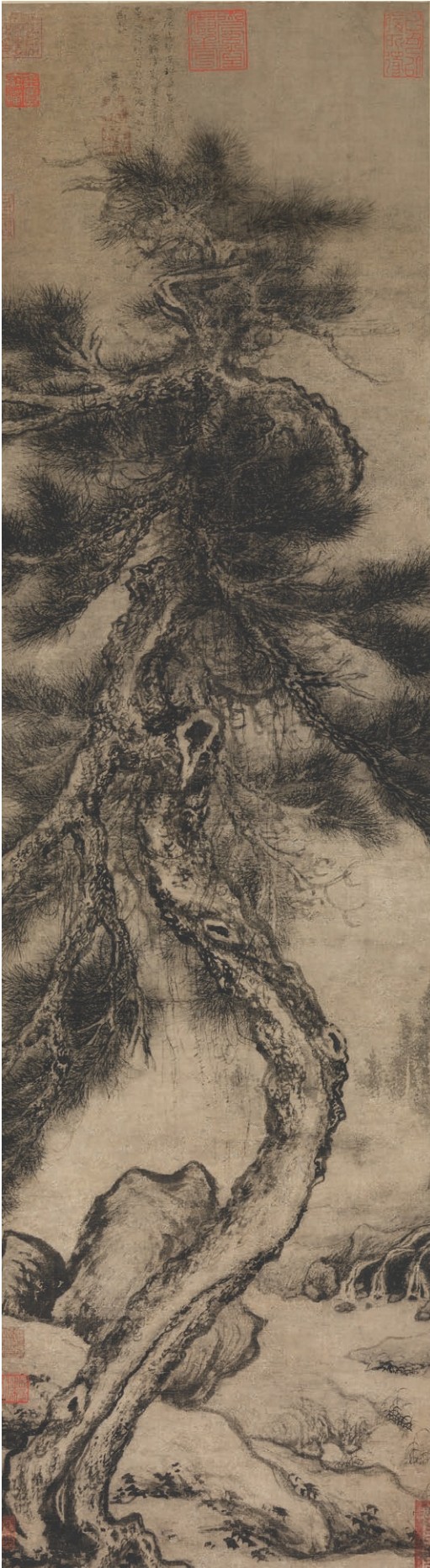
But pines can also have broader and deeper meanings. Wu Boli’s (14th-15th century) *Dragon Pine* (fig. 3.4.c), for example, is a manifestation of *qi*, a cosmic energy that according to Daoism permeates our world. The shape of the pine recalls the double-S curve of the yin-yang symbol (Augustin, 2011).

In Ma Yuan’s *Scholar Viewing a Waterfall* (fig. 3.4.b), one can clearly perceive the sounds of flowing water and swaying pines, that give a glimpse of the harmonious rhythm of the universe. By understanding the joy of listening to Nature, one can experience the infinity of the world (Yi Wang, 2015, p. 118).

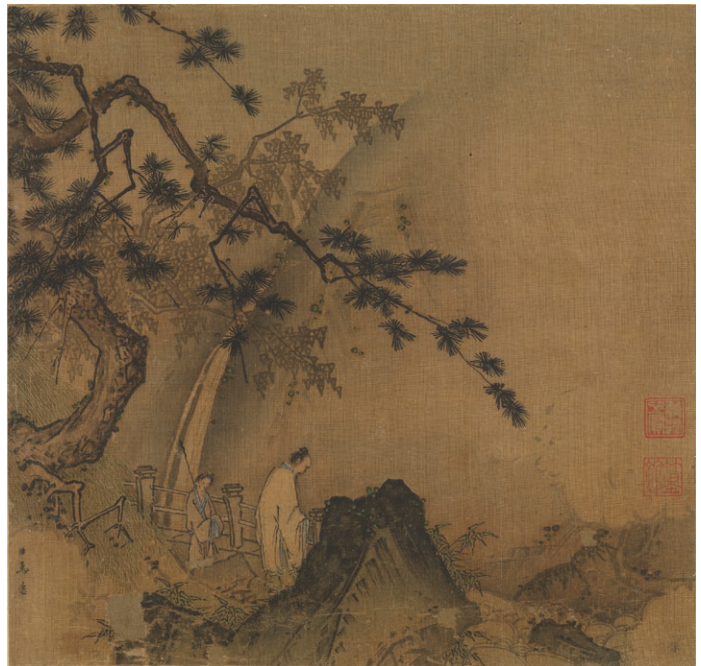
3.4.5 Pine: literature

As in painting, also in literature can be found the usual symbolic associations typical of pines. Firstly, pine as a symbol of longevity, as in these verses by Hung Jen (1610-1664):

How old is he? What man can tell?
When the Yellow Emperor was compounding the elixir of immortality at the begin-



■ **Fig. 3.4.a** Ma Yuan (active c. 1190-1225), *Leisure Chanting Underneath the Pine*.



■ **Fig. 3.4.b** Ma Yuan (active c. 1190-1225), *Scholar Viewing a Waterfall*, 25.1 x 26 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

■ **Fig. 3.4.c** Wu Boli (14th-15th century), *Dragon Pine*, 121.9 x 33.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

ning of time,
His dense scales and claws were already full grown. (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 168)

Secondly, pines associated to cranes, once again to represent longevity, as in Du Fu's (712-770) "Poetic Thoughts on Ancient Sites IV":

The ruler of Shu had his eyes on Wu and progressed as far as the Three Gorges.
In the year of his demise, too, he was in the Palace of Eternal Peace.
The blue-green banners can be imagined on the empty mountain,
The jade palace is a void in the deserted temple.
In the pines of the ancient shrine aquatic cranes nest;
At summer and winter festivals the comers are village elders.
The Martial Marquis's memorial shrine is ever nearby;
In union, sovereign and minister share the sacrifices together. (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

Other reflections come from the image of wind swirling through pines, that was very much loved by poets and considered a way to get to a deeper mental state and meditate. An example is Qiu Wei's "After Missing the Recluse on the Western Mountain" (Tang dynasty):

You have become my meditation –
The beauty of your grasses, fresh with rain,
And close beside your window the music of your pines.
I take into my being all that I see and hear,
Soothing my senses, quieting my heart (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

This meditation, this pure understanding of Nature can be more fulfilling than the honors of being an imperial officer, as explained by Wang Wei in "Answering Vice-prefect Zhang":

As the years go by, give me but peace,
Freedom from ten thousand matters.
I ask myself and always answer:
What can be better than coming home?
A wind from the pine-trees blows my sash,
And my lute is bright with the mountain moon.
You ask me about good and evil fortune?...
Hark, on the lake there's a fisherman singing! (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

3.4.6 Pine: garden design

Pines were used in Chinese classical gardens for many reasons: their symbolic meanings and associations, their shape, their evergreen foliage and the sound they produced when wind swirled through them. Their value is recognized by garden designer Wen Zhenheng, who claims in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things* that "although pine and cedar are spoken

of in the same breath and are the noblest of all, pride of place must go to the pine” (2019, p. 38). The significance of planting a pine was also highlighted by painter and poet Shen Zhou (1427-1509), who wrote the following verses:

He who plants a pine will never grow old,
Will forever walk the earth as an immortal. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, pp. 17-18)

When creating a scenery, pines can be used to evoke the secluded image of mountains: “the mosses, the boulder and the shadows of the pine trees, which set up the activities of playing the lute and collecting herbs, are all typical icons of the life of the recluse” (Feng, 1998, p. 344). Wen Zhenheng gives specific indication on where to plant specimens of *Pinus bungeana*: “in front of halls, in wide courtyards or on terraces” (2019, p. 38).

In Chinese classical gardens, it is very important to stimulate not only sight, but all human senses. As seen in poetry, the sound of wind swirling through pines is highly regarded, as it can trigger imagination or meditation, and it can elevate man by making him see his relationship with the rest of the universe. This special musical experience is described by Qing emperor Kangxi (1654-1722) in a poem on the Chengde Summer Mountain Resort:

Occupy high mounds, overlooking a deep steam.
Long pine trees surround greens.
Wind passing through empty gullies,
Sounds like a trio of the *sheng* and the *yong*.¹ (as cited in Yi Wang, 2015, p. 56)

3.4.7 Juniper

Juniperus chinensis is a coniferous shrub or tree, belonging to the family *Cupressaceae*, generally referred to as “cypresses.”² It’s commonly known as “Chinese juniper.” Its native range includes mainland China, Taiwan, Myanmar, Japan, Korea and Eastern Russia. It can grow up to 1 to 20 meters tall. Its scale-leaves are 1.5 to 3 millimeters long. It usually grows in full sun.

Juniperus chinensis’s Chinese name is *guìbǎi* (桧柏). *Guì* (桧) refers to the Chinese juniper and is composed of the character *huì* (会), meaning “meeting, gathering, association,” and the radical *mù* (木), meaning “tree, timber, wood.” *Bǎi* (柏) means “cypress, cedar.” It is composed of the character *bái* (白), meaning “white, clear, pure,” and the radical *mù* (木). The Chinese, therefore, considered *Juniperus chinensis* part of the wider category of cypresses, defined by the character *bǎi* (柏). As it sounds like *bǎi* (百), that means “hundred,” this plant

1 *Sheng* and *yong* are traditional Chinese music instruments. The first is a pipe instrument; the second is a percussion instrument.

2 The family *Cupressaceae* includes 130-140 species, among which there are cypresses, thujas and redwoods.

represents the wish to have one hundred sons. Furthermore, because of its evergreen foliage, it is considered a symbol of longevity and is often planted near graves, similarly to the pine (cf. paragraph 3.4.4).

Its significance in Chinese culture and its meanings are well summarized in Du Fu's poem "A Song of an Old Cypress":

Beside the Temple of the Great Premier stands an ancient cypress
 With a trunk of green bronze and a root of stone.
 The girth of its white bark would be the reach of forty men
 And its tip of kingfish-blue is two thousand feet in heaven.
 Dating from the days of a great ruler's great statesman,
 Their very tree is loved now and honoured by the people.
 Clouds come to it from far away, from the Wu cliffs,
 And the cold moon glistens on its peak of snow.
 ...East of the Silk Pavilion yesterday I found
 The ancient ruler and wise statesman both worshipped in one temple,
 Whose tree, with curious branches, ages the whole landscape
 In spite of the fresh colours of the windows and the doors.
 And so firm is the deep root, so established underground,
 That its lone lofty boughs can dare the weight of winds,
 Its only protection the Heavenly Power,
 Its only endurance the art of its Creator.
 Though oxen sway ten thousand heads, they cannot move a mountain.
 ...When beams are required to restore a great house,
 Though a tree writes no memorial, yet people understand
 That not unless they fell it can use be made of it....
 Its bitter heart may be tenanted now by black and white ants,
 But its odorous leaves were once the nest of phoenixes and pheasants.
 ...Let wise and hopeful men harbour no complaint.
 The greater the timber, the tougher it is to use. (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

It can be seen that the cypress is associated with ancientness, longevity, heaven, firmness, stability, honor and respect. According to Edwin T. Morris, *Juniperus chinensis* is planted in gardens "wherever dignity and regularity are desired" (1983, p. 167).

3.4.8 Camellia

Camellia japonica is an evergreen shrub or tree, belonging to the family *Theaceae*.¹ It is generally known as "common camellia" or "Japanese camellia." Its native range includes mainland China, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. It can grow up to 1.5 to 6 meters tall. Its leathery leaves are 5 to 11 centimeters long and 2.5 to 6 centimeters wide, with serrulate margins and a pointy tip. It usually flowers between January and March. Its flowers feature six or

¹ The family *Theaceae* includes around 365 species, among which there is the tea plant.

seven petals, white or rose. This species usually grows in shady areas, protected from cold winds.

Camellia japonica's Chinese name is *shānchá* (山茶). *Shān* (山) means “hill, mountain,” while *chá* (茶) means “tea,” referring both to the plant and the drink.

As camellias are evergreen and bloom in late winter, they are considered a symbol of nobleness, tenacity, integrity and endurance. For this reason, they often appear in winter landscape paintings and in Spring Festival decorations, as a wish for luck, longevity and prosperity. As a symbol of winter, they are often depicted in paintings together with plum blossoms. Furthermore, because of their beautiful flowers, camellias are associated to grace.

In poetry, flowering camellias are a recurrent image and bear a double meaning: on one hand, they convey melancholy and represent the transience of life, as their blooms last only for few weeks, while on the other hand they are a symbol of hope and rebirth, as they flower at the end of winter, when spring is near. An example of this is Jiang Zong's (519-594) “A Spring Day in a Mountain Pavilion”:



■ **Fig. 3.4.d** Detail of Hu Zhengyan (c. 1584-1674), *Bird and Flower 8*, from *Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Calligraphy and Painting*, Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino (California).

I have had just five days of leave
During which I perched up on a hillside.
An ancient quince crosses the nearby gully
A precarious rock towers in front of the island.
The bank is green with fresh river willow
The pool shines red with reflected camellias
Wild flowers peacefully wait out the end of the month
How can mountain insects be aware there is an autumn?
Can humans retrace their lives at all?
A night candle cannot keep going forever. (as cited in Menzies, 2017, p. 464)

Camellias have often been planted in Chinese classical gardens because of their many qualities, listed by Feng Shike (1541-1617), a local administrator of Yunnan and Guizhou in his *Account of the Camellias of Central Yunnan*. In it, he highlights some of the most appreciated features of this plant:

- The colours are bright without being shocking.
- Even when a tree has lived 2 to 300 years, it still looks as though it has only just been planted. . . .
- The branches are dark and bunch up into shapes like a deer's tail or a dragon. . . .
- It can stand up to frost and snow and stays green through all four seasons. . . . (as cited in Menzies, 2017, pp. 467-468)

3.4.9 Art appreciation in Chinese classical gardens

Appreciation of artistic and cultural artifacts, especially calligraphy and painting works, was one of the key elements of Chinese garden culture. Since the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the “cultural relics and antique studies” acquired more and more importance among the interests of scholars. Officials, poets, painters and garden designers became also collectors of artistic and cultural artifacts. Wen Zhenheng, in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, dedicated a whole chapter to calligraphy and painting, emphasizing the importance for a truly elegant gentleman of appreciating these arts. He wrote:

Gold is mined in the hills and pearls are produced from the depths, they are inexhaustible and valued by all beneath heaven. Thus, calligraphy and painting, having existed in the universe for so long and yet artists of note only able to live a single life, how much more should they be similarly collected and treasured? (2019, p. 63)

Scholars, therefore, usually possessed large collections of artifacts, that they displayed in their house and garden according to the season and related festivals. Wen Zhenheng suggests, for example, to hang on the first day of the new year paintings from the Song Dynasty representing gods of good fortune, while during the eighth month one should exhibit



■ Fig. 3.4.e Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *East Garden*, 30.2 x 126 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.



■ Fig. 3.4.f Qiu Ying (c. 1494-1552), *Appreciating Antiquities in the Bamboo Garden*, 33.8 x 41.4 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

■ Fig. 3.4.g You Qiu (c. 1525-1580), *Examining Antiques*, 93.1 x 31.1 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

paintings of osmanthus trees, flowers and book rooms (2019, p. 79).

The *yaji* were an occasion for scholars to share their knowledge and passion, a sort of “multi-media artistic event” where they could get inspiration from each other and from the past. During such events, they would sit around a table in the garden, examining artifacts of all sorts. It was important that the setting conveyed a sense of peace and tranquility, allowing them to approach the art pieces “with a clear mind and settled heart” (Wen, 2019, p. 64).

The appreciation of artistic and cultural artifacts has been depicted in several paintings in the course of the centuries. The painting *Western Garden* (fig. 3.4.e), by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), represents a *yaji* held in 1527 in Nanjing’s Western Garden. The author himself took part to the meeting, along with other famous poets, calligraphers and scholars. In this painting, the host is depicted in the act of welcoming one of the guests, followed by a servant that carries a *qin*. In a pavilion surrounded by trees, four scholars are examining some paintings or calligraphies, while a servant is bringing them more scrolls. Other servants are preparing tea.

Other paintings, such as You Qiu’s (c. 1525-1580) *Examining Antiques* (fig. 3.4.g) and Qiu Ying’s (c. 1494-1552) *Appreciating Antiques in the Bamboo Garden* (fig. 3.4.f), display a greater variety of artifacts besides calligraphies and paintings: bronzes, porcelains, literary utensils, incense burners.

At the *yaji*, the experience of art appreciation was interactive, and required the active participation of the viewer, who had to handle the scrolls with his own hands in order to examine them. Artistic and cultural artifacts were not “museumified” and sacralized, but were part of a living tradition, being continuously copied and reinterpreted. Besides, collectors used to put their seal on the paintings and calligraphies they owned, thus enriching the history of the artifacts.

Traditionally, the *yaji* had the role of endorsing and legitimizing art, being to China what the institution of the museum is for the West (Chang & Gao, 2018). The authority to perform this function came from the reputation of the participants, but also from the fact that *yaji* were held in gardens, as Nature was the source of artistic inspiration. And Nature dictated also the conditions for the appreciation of artworks: depending on the time of the day and the season, light conditions could determine very different experiences in examining a certain painting or calligraphy in different moments.

3.4.10 The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda

The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda is a three-bay building, located in the northern part of the Master of Nets Garden, the one dedicated to intellectual activities.

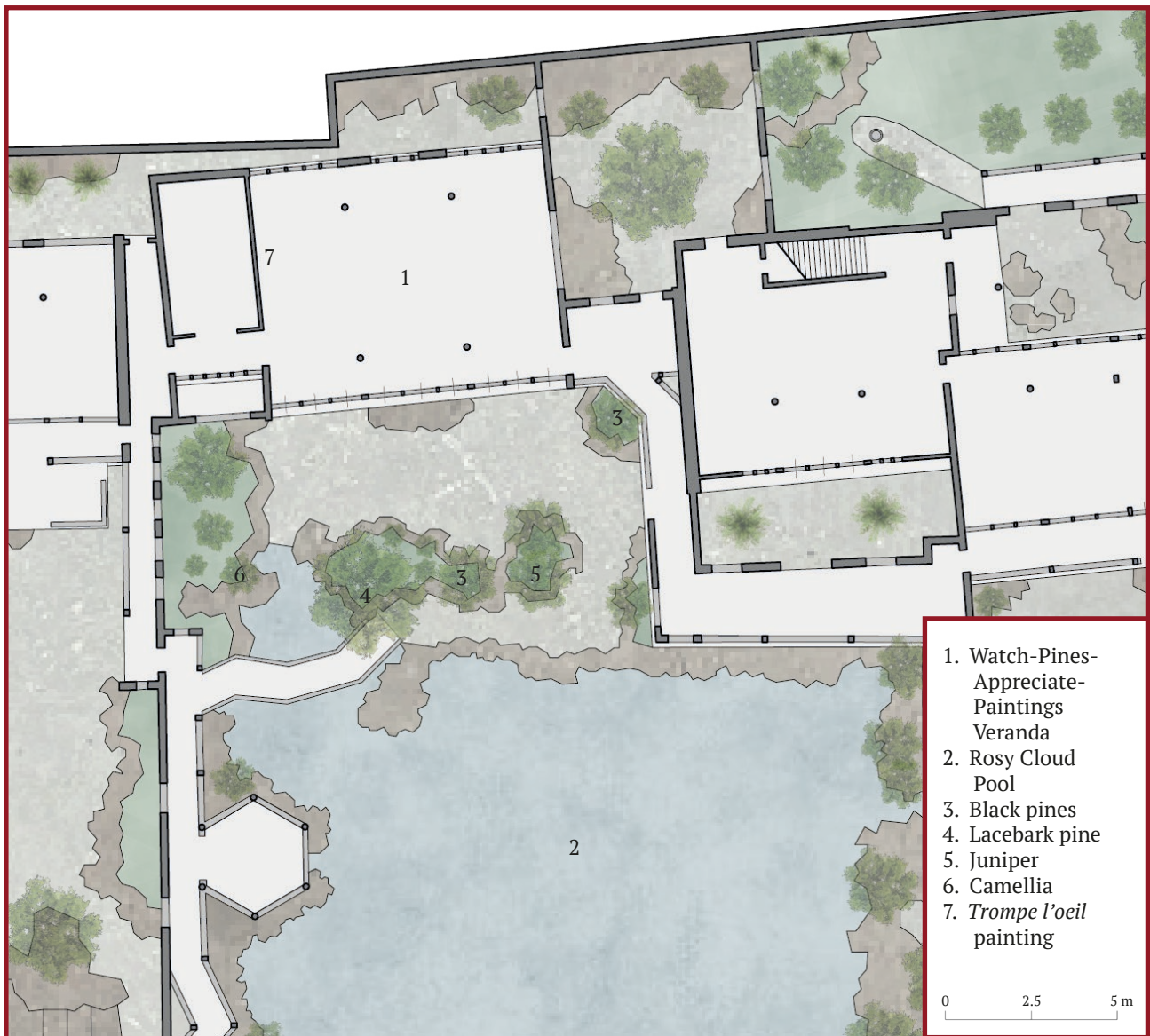


Fig. 3.4.h Plan of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda and its surroundings.



Fig. 3.4.i The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



Fig. 3.4.j The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.

However, the fact that it is considered the main hall of the garden, its position near the Rosy Cloud Pool and its function are all features that make this building also a place for gatherings and social activities. Like the other buildings around the lake (that will be analyzed in paragraph 3.8.14), the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda has a double vocation, both social and intellectual.

As its name suggests, the purpose of this building is to be a place for appreciating artistic and cultural artifacts. It has been discussed in the previous paragraph, however, that this is only possible in a natural setting, as Nature is the source of artistic inspiration. This explains the first part of the name, “Watch-Pines”: contemplating Art and contemplating Nature are two complementary activities that cannot be separated. The building thus has to convey to the people inside it the impression of being surrounded by a natural setting, of living like a recluse (figs. 3.4.k-l). This is achieved, first of all, by a careful management of the openings on the four walls: the southern side is completely open, granting a view on the pines and other plants placed in front of the building (fig. 3.4.m); on the eastern wall, a window allows to look at several screens and courtyards, one after another; to the north, three windows look into a narrow space, framing compositions of plants and rocks that can be admired as if they were paintings (fig. 3.4.o); finally, on the western side, the absence of openings is compensated by the presence of a *trompe-l’oeil* painting, depicting pine trees and a distant hill with a pagoda (fig. 3.4.p). The connection to Nature is not only visual, but also acoustic: the sound of wind swirling through the pines is another essential element. The perceived effect of this whole arrangement is that of a room open to the landscape on all sides: one appreciates both the real pines of the garden and the simulated pines of the painting, and enjoys both their sound and their shape and color. The place creates a sense of perfect harmony with nature, of correspondence between human activity (Art) and natural activity.

As the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda is the main hall of the Master of Nets Garden and constitutes a setting for scholar gatherings, the vegetation planted in front of it has to express appropriate meanings. Pine, cypress and camellia are the species that have been chosen to fulfill these requirements: they represent dignity, longevity, virtue, nobleness, integrity, honor, tenacity and endurance. Besides, their aesthetic qualities, such as their peculiar shapes, their evergreen foliage and, in the case of camellias, their elegant flowers, are beautiful sources of artistic inspiration and are therefore especially suitable for a place dedicated to art appreciation. The plants that can be found in front of this building enjoy the perfect conditions for their growth, that is full sun for pines and cypresses and shadow for camellias, and some of the specimens are among the most ancient trees in the



■ Fig. 3.4.k Pines in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.



■ Fig. 3.4.l The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda and a small camellia tree.



■ Fig. 3.4.m View of pines and cypress from inside the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.



■ Fig. 3.4.n Pine in front of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.



■ Fig. 3.4.o Window in the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda.

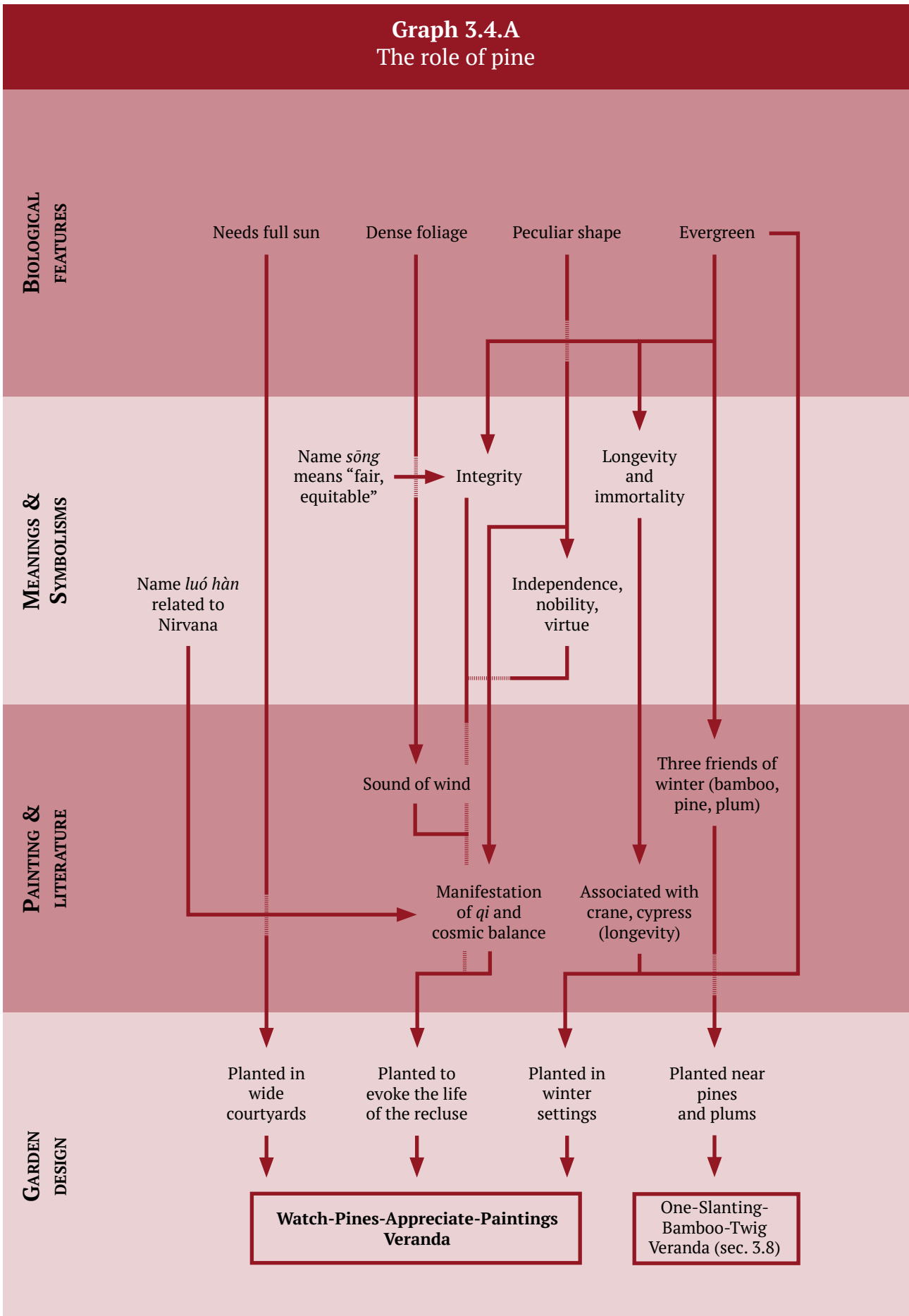


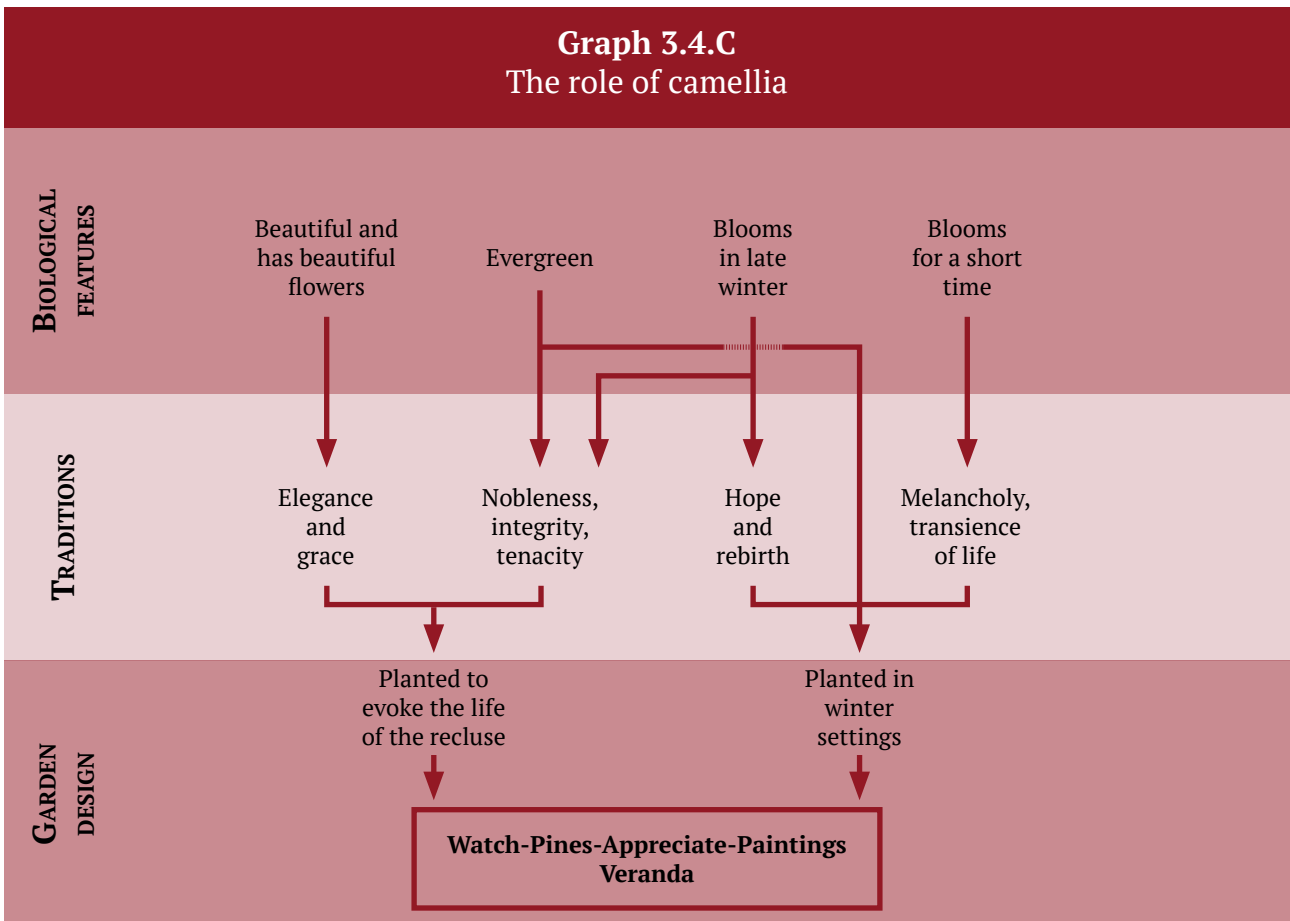
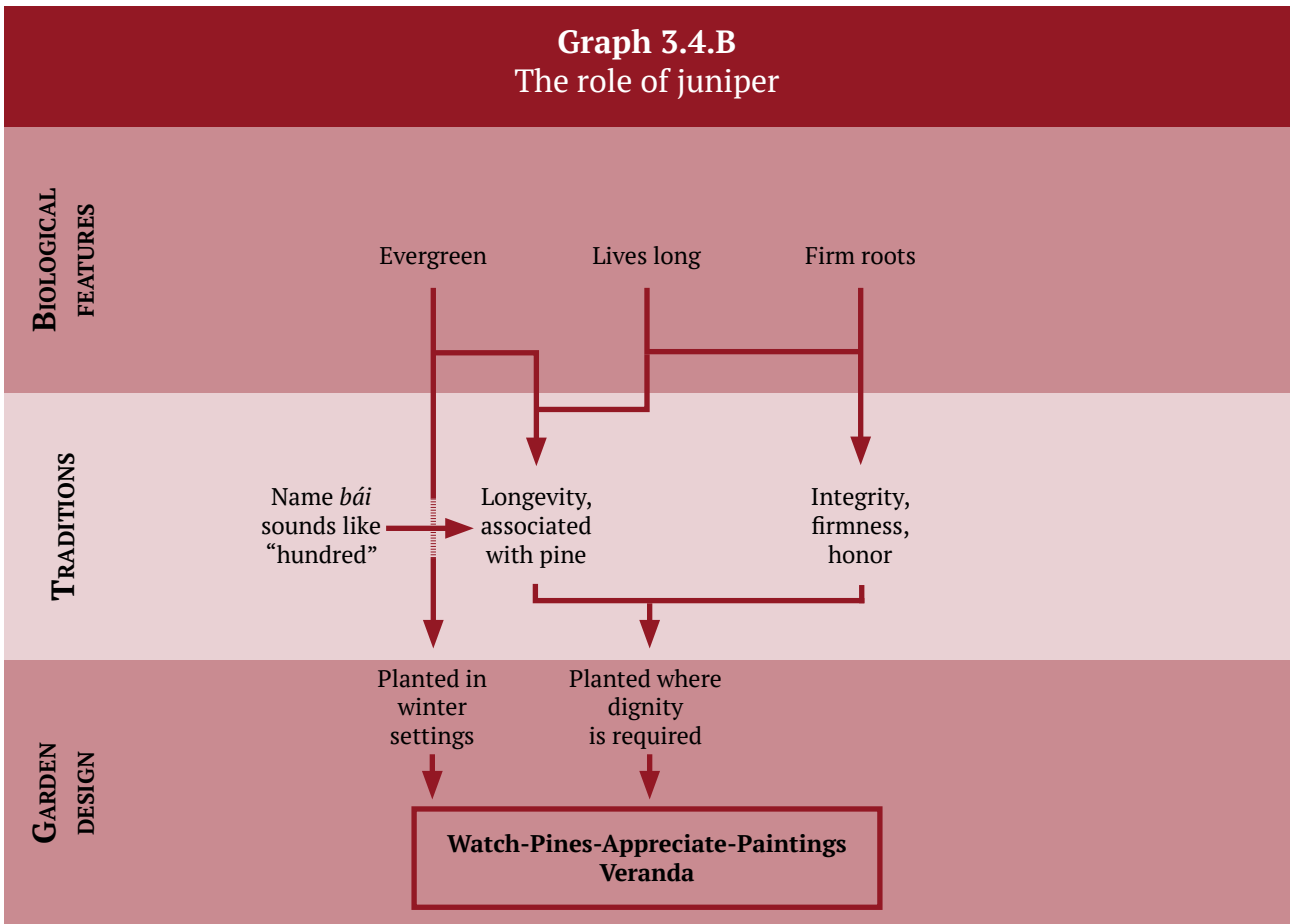
■ Fig. 3.4.p Interior of the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda with a *trompe l'oeil* painting.

Master of Nets Garden, being planted at the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

Another crucial aspect that has to be taken into account when analyzing the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda is that it is one of the four buildings located around the Rosy Cloud Pool that are associated to the four seasons. In this case, the reference is to winter. The building is located on the northern side of the lake and, according to Chinese traditions, north is the cardinal point associated with winter. The Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda has been designed so that it can be a pleasant space especially during the cold season: the large openings on its southern side allow sunlight to enter the building and heat it up, while the presence of evergreen, wintery plants creates an enjoyable scenery.

Graph 3.4.A
The role of pine





3.5 THE FIVE PEAKS LIBRARY AND THE ROLE OF BANANA

The owner of the Master of Nets Garden conducted his business in the Five Peaks Library, a study located in the northern part of the garden where he would also read and practice calligraphy. In the adjacent courtyards there are a banana tree and a scholar tree. In this section, the significance of these plants in Chinese culture will be explored, and their relationship with the space of the Five Peaks Library and the practice of calligraphy will be discussed.

3.5.1 Banana: biology and history

Musa basjoo is an herbaceous¹ perennial plant. It is commonly known as “Japanese banana” or “hardy banana.” It is native to Southern China.

It can grow up to 2 to 2.5 meters tall. When mature, its leaves can be as long as 2 meters and as wide as 70 centimeters. The flowers appear in summer, are yellow and can reach a diameter of 1 meter. The fruits are yellow-green, around 5 to 10 centimeters long and 3 centimeters wide.

This species can usually tolerate temperatures slightly below 0° C. If properly protected, though, its roots can survive even in colder situations. It can grow in full sun or partial shade.

The first description of *Musa basjoo* in Chinese history was given by Han Dynasty scholar Yang Fu (fl. 210s-230s) in his *Record of Strange Things*, a work that lists unusual things from the South of China (Reynolds, 1940, p. 167). The writings of Ku Hui (c. 170-250) attest that in his time this plant was already cultivated in the Jiangnan region (Reynolds, 1940, p. 168). In the following centuries, it spread all over the country, acquiring a great importance in Chinese culture.

3.5.2 Banana: meaning of the name

Musa basjoo's Chinese name is *bājiāo* (芭蕉). *Bā* (芭) means “fragrant plant, herb, banana” and is composed of the character *bā* (巴), meaning “hope, wait anxiously for, wish,” and the radical *cǎo* (艹), meaning “grass.” *Jiāo* (蕉) means “broadleaf plant, banana.” This character, originally, referred to plant fibers used for making linen.

3.5.3 Banana: symbolism

Banana's symbolic meaning is related to the story of the monk Huai Su (725-785), one of

1 An herbaceous plant is one that does not have a woody stem.

the most important calligraphers from the Tang Dynasty (618-907), famous for getting his inspiration when drunk. During his youth, he was too poor to buy paper, so he planted more than ten thousand banana trees and wrote on their leaves. It is said that he used to practice so hard that his banana leaves would become almost completely black. Therefore, bananas came to symbolize self-improvement and self-discipline.

3.5.4 Banana: painting

Banana trees are a recurring theme in Buddhist painting. In *Banana Tree and Buddhist Figure* (fig. 3.5.a) by Jin Nong (1687-1773), a man is sitting under a banana tree, in deep meditation. The subject is probably Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk who, during the 5th or 6th century, was the first Chinese patriarch of Chan Buddhism. His teachings were based on meditation, absence of self and denial of reality.

Jin Nong's inscription explains the metaphorical meaning of the association of Bodhidharma and the banana tree:

The banana palm, Buddhists call it the "banana tree," to denote how the self will always preserve its innate sagacity. In a grove beneath the green heavens, I painted an ancient Buddhist entity, sitting in meditation on the *rencao* [grass]. (Olivovà & Børdahl, 2009, p. 413)



■ **Fig. 3.5.a** Jin Nong (1687-1773), *Banana Tree and Buddhist Figure*, 124.5 x 27 cm, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai.

3.5.5 Banana: literature

Starting from the 5th century, bananas became a popular subject in Chinese literature. More than their shape or color, the element that sparked the imagination of the poets was the sound produced by banana leaves when hit by raindrops or moved by the wind. This image conveyed a sense of melancholy and introspection, as expressed by Song Dynasty poet Li Qingzhao in “Banana Trees: To the Tune ‘Picking Mulberries’”:

Who planted banana trees in front of my window?
Their shadows fall in the midst of the courtyard
Their shadows fall in the midst of the courtyard
Leaves like hearts, leaves like hearts,
That open and close with excess of love.
Midnight, rain on the leaves saddens my own heart.
Dien! Di! Dien! Di! Bitter cold, unceasing rain.
Drip! Drop! Drip! Drop! Bitter cold, unceasing rain.
Loneliness. Loneliness.
Sorrow corrodes this exile from the North.
How can I bear to lie awake and listen? (1979, p. 39)

During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), in the late 17th century, one of the first public literary societies for women was founded in Hangzhou: its name was “The Banana Garden Poetry Club.” For the members of the club, the “banana garden” was an image of paradise, as demonstrated by the poem “[To the Tune of] Man Ting Fang: At the Villa by the Lake I Watch a Group of Girls on a Trip” by Qian Fenglun (1644-1703):

Green as dye, the banana leaves
Red as fire, the peony
Each site looks more lush and beautiful than the other
Having completed my make-up I sit in a small pavilion
All alone and silent, not uttering a single word
I draw water myself from the gushing spring to make tea
How delicious the aroma! How refreshing and soothing!
...
The view ends at the horizon
Beyond the expanse of water and the vastness of the sky
I wish I were, in the luxuriant fragrant grass,
The plain one of a pair of mandarin ducks. (as cited in Berg, 2007, p. 79)

The banana leaves mentioned in the first verse create right from the start of the poem an atmosphere of pastoral idyll, perfect for literary activities.

3.5.6 Banana: garden design

In Chinese classical gardens, banana trees were appreciated for their large, bright green leaves. As Wen Zhenheng wrote in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, “its green reflects the sunlight at a window” (2019, p. 46).

The most renowned feature of this plant, however, consists in the sounds that its leaves produce when raindrops hit them, when dew drips from them or when wind swirls through them. The *Yuan Ye*, in fact, reads: “The raindrops in the night that fall upon the banana leaves are like the tears of a weeping mermaid” (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 172).

Therefore, traditionally banana trees are located in front of white walls that bring out the shape and color of their leaves, or near the corner of courtyards. They are often planted together with bamboos, in a combination known as *shuangqing*.

Banana trees can be commonly found in proximity of study rooms, where they create an atmosphere of introspection, tranquility and peace.

3.5.7 Scholar tree

Styphnolobium japonicum (or *Sophora japonica*) is a deciduous tree, belonging to the family *Fabaceae*, generally referred to as “legumes.”¹ It is commonly known as “scholar tree” or “pagoda tree.” It is native to China and Korea. This species can grow up to 10 to 20 meters tall. Its pinnate leaves are up to 25 centimeters long, with a smooth margin. Its small white flowers appear between August and September. The fruits are six-seeded legumes, around 10 centimeters long, that mature in fall and persist during winter. Scholar trees usually grow in full sun or partial shade.

Styphnolobium japonicum’s Chinese name is *huái* (槐), composed of the character *guǐ* (鬼), meaning “ghost, spirit, demon,” and the radical *mù* (木), meaning “tree, timber, wood.” Because of this name, and because in the wild they are often found alone, far from trees of other species, it is said that scholar trees are inhabited by demons. They appear in several stories and legends: for example, Emperor Chongzhen, the last Ming ruler, hanged himself from a scholar tree in Beijing.

In the Chinese tradition, this plant is highly valued for the medicinal properties that can be found in all its parts: flowers, buds, leaves, bark and seeds. The flowers and buds, in particular, have been used for centuries to treat various problems of the cardiovascular system (He et al., 2016, p. 161). Scholar tree flowers are also commonly used as an ingredient to prepare dumplings or desserts.

¹ The family *Fabaceae* is the third-largest land plant family in number of species, with more than 19,000 species, among which there are soybeans, beans, peas, chickpeas, peanuts, licorice, baobab, tamarind and acacia.



■ **Fig. 3.5.b** Detail of Liu Songnian (1174-1224), *At Study in the Hill Studio*, 24.3 x 24 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



■ **Fig. 3.5.c** Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), *Literary Gathering in the Western Garden*, 131.5 x 67 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The scholar tree was associated to imperial examinations and would bring good luck in passing such exams. There were several sayings based on this belief: during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), for example, “stepping on the scholar tree” meant “taking a son to the capital for the examination.”

In painting, scholar trees often played a role similar to that of magnolias (cf. paragraph 3.7.5), while in poetry they represented spring, as in these verses by Yuan Mei (1716-1798):

Scholar-tree blooms warm in spring, filling the office with verdure;
Without putting on my black boots, I enter the courtroom.
There are not many suits and less than three inches of files;
My mind is so calm, I let the public hear proceedings. . . . (as cited in Schmidt, 2013)

It can be noticed how scholar trees convey to the poet a sense of calmness and tranquility. In another poem by Yuan Mei, this plant mentioned as a source of shadow:

Red wisteria blossoms crush the hall where I read;
I'm granted scholar-tree shade, a half acre of coolness. (as cited in Schmidt, 2013)

Shadow was indeed one of the most appreciated features of scholar trees, as remarked also by Wen Zhenheng, who suggests placing these plants “in a courtyard where they can shade a doorway just like a jade-green canopy” (2019, p. 39).

3.5.8 Calligraphy in Chinese classical gardens

Calligraphy is considered one of the highest forms of art in Chinese culture. As such, it was widely practiced by scholars in their gardens. It was one of the “four arts” and it constituted an essential element of the ideal life to which literati aspired. In *At Study in the Hill Studio* (fig. 3.5.b), by Liu Songnian (1174-1224), a scholar is sitting in a garden pavilion. On his table, several scrolls and literary tools can be seen. The painting conveys a sense of tranquility, the same that the scholar depicted in it would have felt while practicing calligraphy. The pines around the pavilion contribute to enhancing this atmosphere with the sound of the wind swirling through them.

Calligraphy was of course one of the main activities performed during *yaji*. In *Literary Gathering in the Western Garden* (fig. 3.5.c) by Zhao Mengfu, the poet Su Shi is sitting under a pine tree and writing and the painter Mi Fu (1051-1107) carving an inscription on a rock.

Chinese classical gardens often featured buildings specifically made for the purpose of practicing calligraphy. Inside them, special attention was given to the writing table. Wen Zhenheng, in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, gives precise indications both on the placement of the table inside the pavilion and on the arrangement of the utensils on it:

A writing table in natural form may be placed on the left of a room, facing east though in order to avoid sunshine and draughts it should not be too close to a window. On it should be placed one antique inkstone, one brushpot, one ink palette, one small water basin and one further inkstone in the form of a mountain. The ancients placed inkstones on the left so that the reflection from the ink should not dazzle the eye, making writing by lamplight more convenient. Best of all, there should also be a book-weight rule and a paperweight, both polished frequently until they gleam. (2019, p. 129)

In the Chinese tradition, the art of calligraphy is often considered a kind of dance, a dance with the brush that coordinates mind and body and allows the inscriber to merge with Nature. As calligrapher Wang Xizhi (c. 309-365) said, “the *qi* of *shu* [calligraphy] is to reach the Tao, or the natural principles of the cosmos” (as cited in Zhuang, 2012, p. 384). A similar point of view is shared by calligraphy theorist Zhu Changwen (1041-1100):

Wind, rain, water, fire; thunder and lightning; songs and dances, all the movements of Heaven and earth and myriad things . . . must be embodied in the writing of free calligraphy. The movement of writing is like that of the spirits, which is ineffable! (as cited in Zhuang, 2012, p. 384)

Calligraphy was also considered a way for transcending one’s mortality by creating something that would be eternal. In fact, for Chinese scholars, architecture, as it was mainly made of wood, was ephemeral, while an inscription carved in stone would last forever. As Wen Zhenheng wrote,

A garden is known not because of the magnificence of its material forms, but because of the writings associated with it. . . . The writings handed down to posterity, are a form that is enduring and is alive every time when it is read or experienced. (as cited in Zhuang, 2012, p. 386)

3.5.9 The Five Peaks Library

The Five Peaks Library is a two-story building with five bays. It was the study of the garden owner, where he would conduct his business, but also where he would read, write and practice calligraphy. For this reason, it is located in the northern part of the garden, the one dedicated to intellectual activities, but it is also easily reachable from the private environments of the residence.

Its name is a reference to the poem “Gaze Into the Distance: Mt. Lu with Five Ancient Peaks”, by Li Bai:

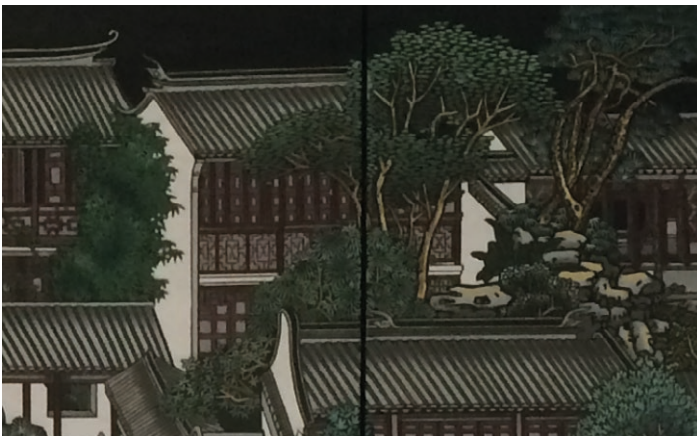
Southeast, Mt. Lu has five primordial peaks
They cut the blue sky to produce five golden lotus flowers. (as cited in Irelder, 2016)

Mount Lu, located in Jiangxi, is considered a holy mountain both by Daoists and Buddhists, but what makes it an appropriate name for a study room is the fact that, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), in that place was established the White Deer Grotto Academy, one of the Four Great Academies of China.

In order to ensure a connection with Nature when studying inside the Five Peaks Library, the building has large openings both on its northern and southern sides, and from the balcony on the upper floor one can even enjoy a view of the Rosy Cloud Pool. The courtyards adjacent to this building have been planted with species whose features enhance concentration, either practically or symbolically.

In a corner of the northern courtyard, planted among several stones, there is a banana tree (figs. 3.5.e-g). It constitutes an almost obvious choice for a study room: the sound its leaves produce with wind, rain or dew create the perfect atmosphere for thinking and reflecting; it is a symbol of self-discipline and self-improvement, but also of Buddhist meditation; and according to the poetic tradition it represents an idyllic paradise for literary activities. The position where this specimen was planted, near a corner where two whitewashed walls meet, creates the conditions for the banana tree to thrive, providing it with partial shade, and allows the green color of its foliage to look even brighter.

On the southern side, instead, there is a larger space with a rockery that represents the Five Peaks of Mount Lu (fig. 3.5.h) and, in a corner, a scholar tree (fig. 3.5.j). The dense foliage of this plant provides shadow, allowing the garden owner to study in the courtyard. Its position in a corner, on the other hand, grants partial shade to the tree itself, allowing it to thrive. As scholar trees are associated with imperial examinations, but also with conveying calmness and tranquility, their meaning is especially appropriate for a study room. Finally, this tree seems to point at the tip of the roof of the Shoot Ducks Corridor, hinting at the fact that there are other spaces beyond the courtyard's wall, in a sort of evocation of infinity.



■ **Fig. 3.5.d** The Five Peaks Library as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 3.5.e** Courtyard to the north of the Five Peaks Library.



Fig. 3.5.f Banana tree in the courtyard to the north of the Five Peaks Library.



Fig. 3.5.g Banana tree seen from inside the Five Peaks Library.

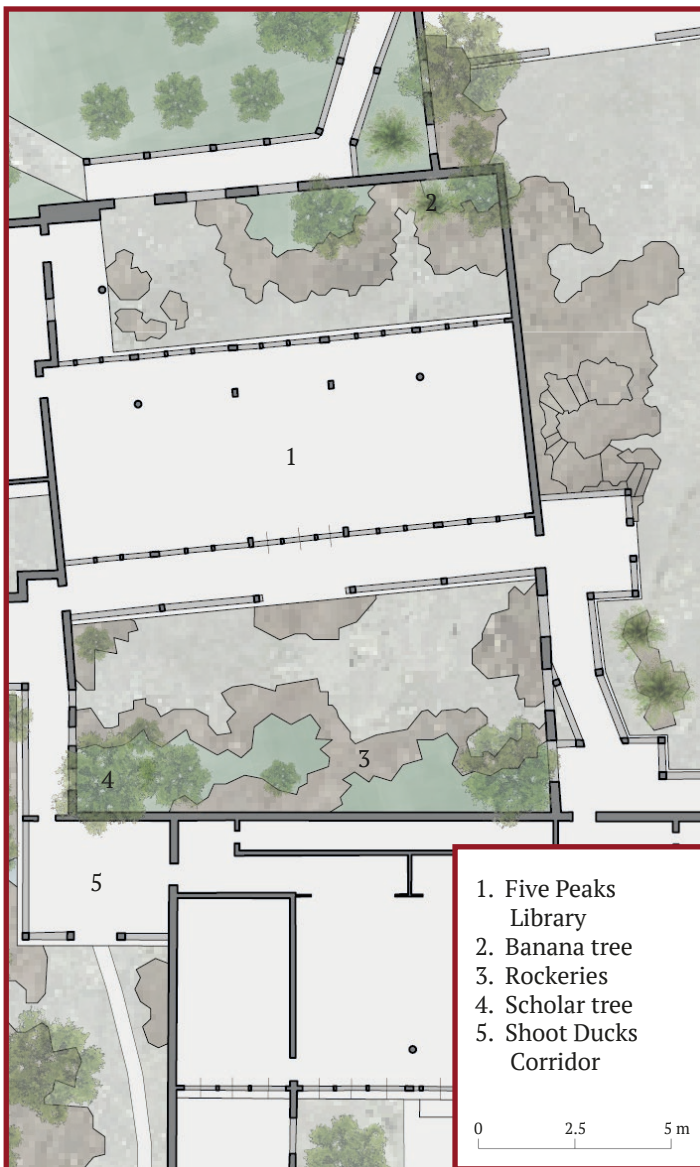


Fig. 3.5.i Plan of the Five Peaks Library and its surroundings.

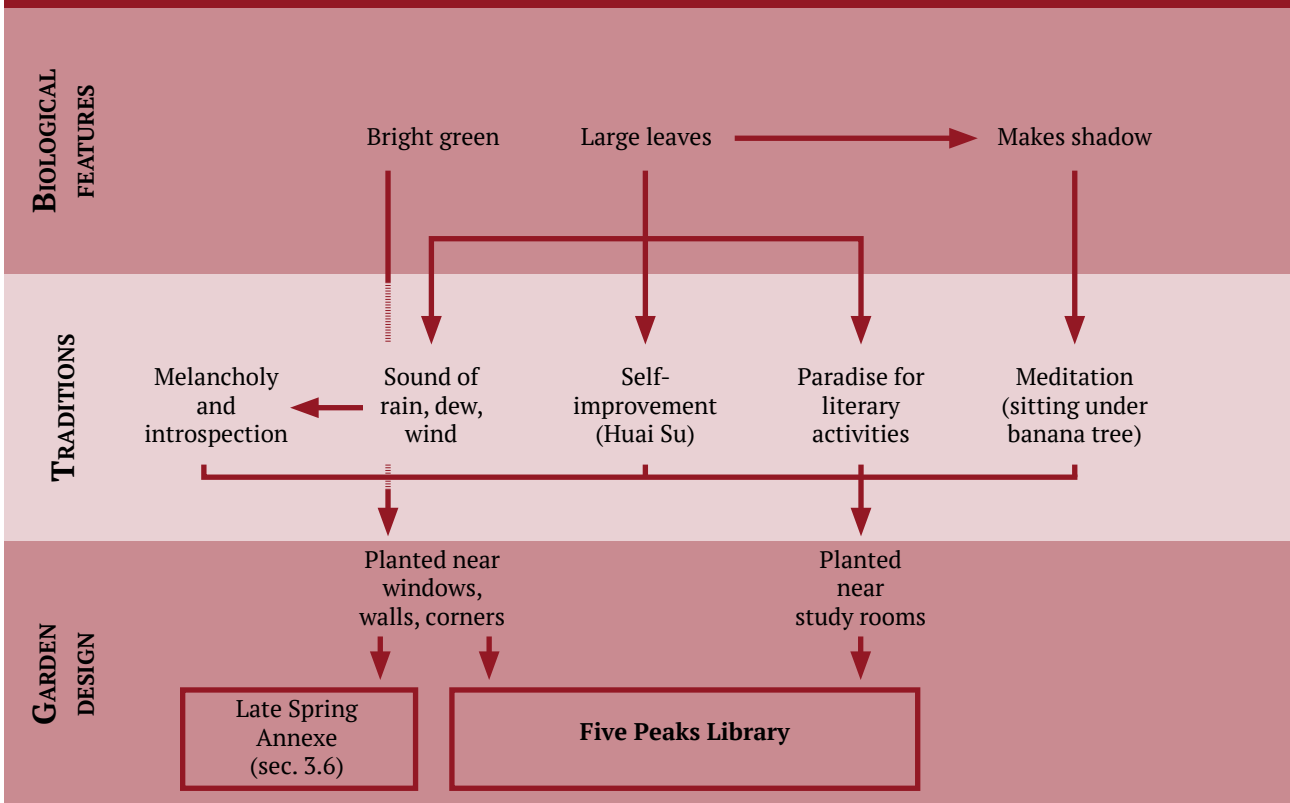


Fig. 3.5.h Rockery in front of the Five Peaks Library.

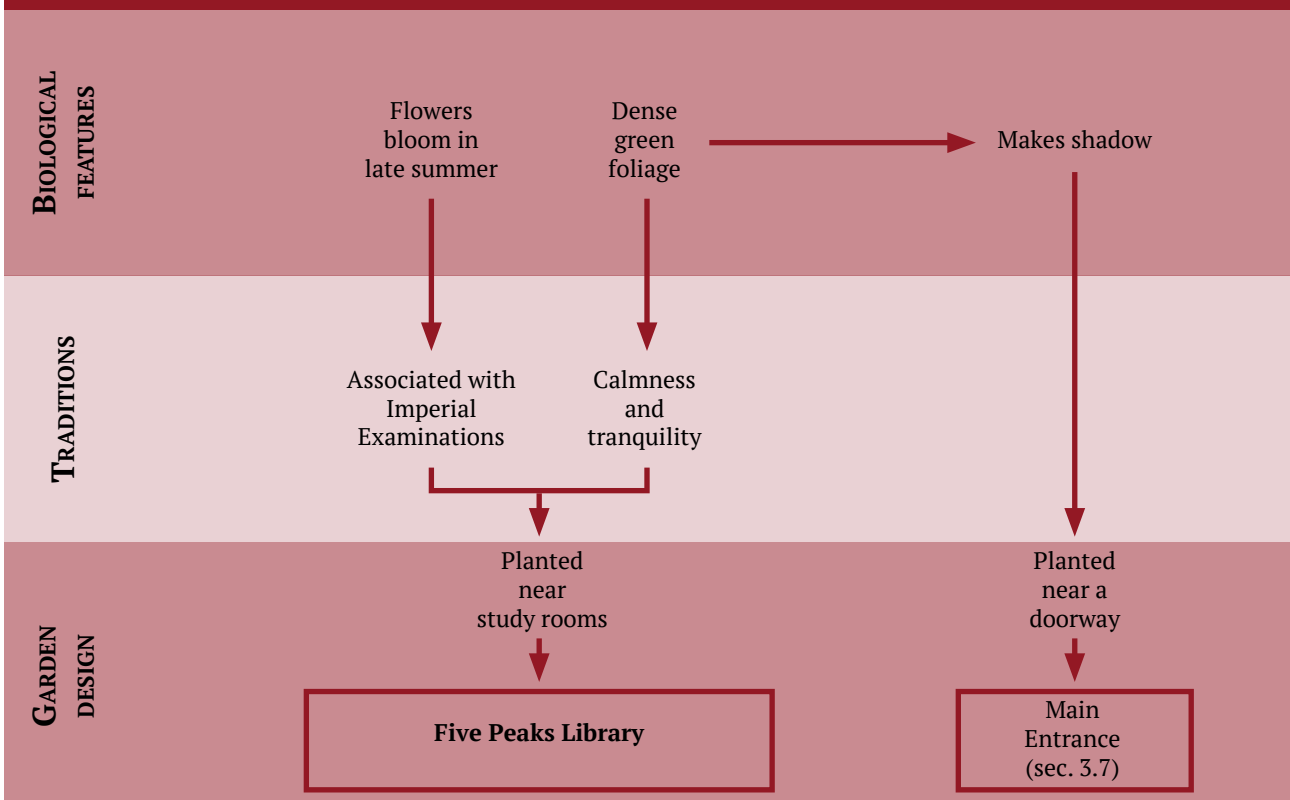


Fig. 3.5.j Courtyard with scholar tree in front of the Five Peaks Library.

Graph 3.5.A
The role of banana



Graph 3.5.B
The role of scholar tree



3.6 THE LATE SPRING ANNEXE AND THE ROLE OF PEONY

The Late Spring Annexe, located at the north-western corner of the Master of Nets Garden, is a study with a courtyard dedicated to the appreciation of peonies. On the northern side of the building, some windows frame compositions of rocks, bamboos, bananas and plums. In this section, the significance of peonies in Chinese culture will be explored, and their relationship with the space of the Late Spring Annexe and the activity of flower appreciation will be discussed.

3.6.1 Peony: biology and history

Peonies constitute the family *Paeoniaceae*.¹ Two species in particular play a key role in Chinese classical gardens: the herbaceous *Paeonia lactiflora* and the woody *Paeonia suffruticosa*.

Paeonia lactiflora is an herbaceous perennial flowering plant, generally known as “Chinese peony” and “common garden peony.” Its native range includes central and eastern Asia, from Tibet to China, Mongolia and Siberia. It can grow up to 50 to 70 centimeters tall. Its leaves are 20 to 40 centimeters long, with irregular margins. Flowers appear in late spring, around May. Their diameter is between 8 and 13 centimeters, and they feature 8 to 10 white, rose or crimson petals. Chinese peonies usually grow in full sun or partial shade, with a preference for shade during the afternoon in especially hot climates.

Paeonia suffruticosa is a deciduous flowering shrub, commonly known as “tree peony.” Its native range includes China and the Himalayas. It can grow up to 1 to 1.5 meters tall. Flowers appear between April and May. Their diameter is between 15 and 20 centimeters, with pink or white petals. Tree peonies usually grow in full sun or partial shade.

Herbaceous peonies were first mentioned in the *Shi Jing* (“Book of Poetry”) between the 11th and the 7th century BCE. Tree peonies, instead, made their first appearance in poetry at the time of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589), when poet Xie Lingyun (385-433) described in his verses a wild specimen of this plant. Before that, they were only mentioned in medical texts. The first reference to tree peonies as part of a garden dates to the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), in Li Bai’s description of the imperial park. By the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), several varieties of this plant were known. The city of Luoyang, in Henan Province, was a renowned center for the cultivation of tree peonies. Their importance is demonstrated by the literary sources of the time. In 1034, historian Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) dedicated an entire monograph to this plant, titled *Luoyang Mudan*

1 The family *Paeoniaceae* includes around 25-40 species.

Ji (“Notes on the Luoyang Tree Peonies”), listing 24 varieties and describing their characteristics. In 1082, scholar Zhou Shihou wrote *Luoyang Hua-mu Ji* (“Notes on the Trees and Flowers of Luoyang”), listing in this case 109 varieties of peonies. In 1095, poet Li Gefei described the gardens of Luoyang in his *Luoyang Mingyuan Ji* (“Record of the Famous Gardens of Luoyang”): “Many flowers are cultivated in Luoyang but only one is just named as ‘the flower’, it is the tree-peony. In every garden peonies are grown” (as cited in Rinaldi, 2012, p. 21). At the time of the Yuan Dynasty, Venetian merchant Marco Polo described these plants as “roses, big as cabbages” (as cited in Keswick, 1978, p. 174). Every year, in Luoyang, the Festival of Ten Thousand Flowers was celebrated, a popular event that attracted great masses of people. Herbaceous peonies, on the other hand, were famously cultivated in Yangzhou. Horticulturalists dedicated a lot of attention to peonies during the course of Chinese history, and by the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) they were able to force this plant to flower in winter, at least inside the Imperial Palace.

3.6.2 Peony: meaning of the name

Paeonia lactiflora’s Chinese name is *sháoyao* (芍药). *Sháo* (芍) means “Chinese peony,” while *yào* (药) means “medicine, medication.” It is also known as *jīn sháoyao* (金芍药), with the character *jīn* (金) meaning “golden, precious, respected.”

Paeonia suffruticosa’s Chinese name is *mǔdan* (牡丹). *Mǔ* (牡) means “male” (referred to animals or plants), while *dān* (丹) means “red.”

3.6.3 Peony: symbolism

According to the Chinese tradition, tree peonies surpass all other plants both in appearance and significance. This is demonstrated by a passage of *The Truths behind Events*, written by Song Dynasty scholar Gao Cheng. In fact, it tells how one spring, Empress Dowager Wu Zetian (624-705) ordered to all the flowers in her garden to bloom, but the tree peony did not obey:

Therefore it is apparent that superiority of tree peony rested with not only its exceedingly enchanting blooms but its indomitable willpower to cling to dignity and reject sycophancy. So, wouldn’t it sound like an understatement to declaim that the superiority evinced by tree peony consists merely in its perfect comeliness? (as cited in Ying Wang, 2018, p. 49)

Known as the “king of flowers,” the peony is a symbol of wealth, aristocracy and, thanks to its presence in imperial gardens, royalty. It is also associated with beautiful and talented women, with beauty, love, and erotic lushness.



■ **Fig. 3.6.a** Shitao (1642-1707), *Peonies*, from *Album of Flowers*, c. 1698, Freer Gallery of Art and Artur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C.

■ **Fig. 3.6.b** Song Guangbao (19th century), *Light-vented Bulbuls and Peonies*.



■ **Fig. 3.6.c** Hua Yan (1682-1756), *White Peony and Rocks*, 1752, 127.6 x 57.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Peonies represent the third month of the Chinese lunar calendar and, in general, are a symbol of spring, being therefore associated with energy and vitality. Together with lotuses (summer), chrysanthemums (autumn) and plums (winter), they create an allegory of the four seasons.

During the Shangsi Festival, celebrated on the third day of the third month, people would take a bath together, in order to cleanse and purify themselves, and lovers would give peonies to each other.

It is also worth noting that the tree peony is the only flower that is purely associated to *yang*, despite flowers in general being considered an expression of the *yin* principle. This is probably because of the masculine nature suggested by its bright red color and its imperial association.

3.6.4 Peony: painting

Peonies are a recurrent subject in Chinese traditional painting. An outstanding example is Shitao's (1642-1707) work titled *Peonies* (fig. 3.6.a), part of an *Album of Flowers*, painted during the last years of his life. Here, the artist represents a couple of peonies, wet with rain, and, in his poem, compares them to the beautiful ladies of the imperial court. The painting is strongly evocative: just by looking at it, one can feel the rain that made the flowers wet, sense their fragrance carried by the wind, and re-live the sensual passions of his youth.

Peonies appear in several traditional motifs. They can be represented together with peacocks or lions, symbolizing nobility, or they can be depicted with lotus flowers, representing glory and power. When combined with peaches, an association of wealth and longevity is evoked, while when coupled with crab apple blossoms, the result is a wish for one's home to be honored. A painting depicting a pair of bulbuls resting on the branch of a peony tree or hovering around it symbolizes the wish for a couple to live in happiness and wealth (fig. 3.6.b).

Peonies also appear in works that express deeper meanings. For example, Hua Yan (1682-1756), in his painting *White Peony and Rocks* (fig. 3.6.c), by depicting the contrast between soft, white flowers and hard, black rock, creates a representation of the cosmic harmony of *yin* and *yang*. The following verses accompany the painting:

At leisure, I study Ma Yuan in chopping lean stone,
And imitate Hsu His in plucking delicate blossoms.
In the two masters' styles are sweet and bitter flavors;
They go perfectly with my tea on the first chilly day of autumn. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, p. 125)

3.6.5 Peony: literature

During the Tang Dynasty, peonies became a popular subject in poetry, usually as a symbol of comeliness. One of the most significant poems composed at that time is Liu Yuxi's (772-842) "To the Tree Peonies":

The peonies in bloom in my yard exhibit gaudiness in spades,
The lotus flowers in my pond look apathetic and ill at ease.
Only the tree peonies can sublime comeliness engender.
The time they unfold is bound to turn the imperial capital raptly astir. (as cited in Ying Wang, 2018, p. 49)

Because of this association with comeliness, peonies were frequently compared to beautiful women. Li Bai wrote three poems praising the beauty of Yang Yuhuan, concubine of Tang Emperor Kaiyuan (713-741), and relating it to tree peonies. One of them goes as follows:

Now you, madam, and tree peony are collaborating on building the palatial carnival.
His Majesty's love of both of you can never be otherwise than eternal,
Because he would, from now on in his leisure hours, nothing do
But the two of you to woo. (as cited in Ying Wang, 2018, p. 48)

Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty and the beginning of the Song Dynasty, a new poetical genre appeared, called *xinyuefu*. In it, peonies started to acquire a connotation of melancholy. This can be seen in Chen Yuyi's (1090-1138) "Tree Peony":

Since the conquest of China proper by the nomads,
The imperial court's been ousted from the capital for less than two decades.
Now, in my dotage I'm alone by the stream lingering
And, with the spring breeze scouring me, the tree peonies watching. (as cited in Ying Wang, 2018, p. 50)

Tree peonies here have become a symbol of nostalgia for the poet's homeland and a source of reflection on his own life.

Besides poetry, peonies have had a role also in other traditional literary genres, such as opera. For example, these flowers appear in the title of the famous Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion*, a romantic tragicomedy written by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) in 1598. It is partly set in a Chinese classical garden and it depicts a love story in which the protagonists overcome all sorts of obstacles, including death, and in the end get together and live happily.

3.6.6 Peony: garden design

Peonies were one of the most appreciated plants in Chinese classical gardens: they were usually planted in solemn spaces, so that visitors could clearly see the rank and wealth of the owners. As Wen Zhenheng put it in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, “there can be nothing poverty-stricken in their cultivation and appreciation” (2019, p. 32). Entire courtyards were dedicated to this plant, despite its short flowering period.

Peonies were often grown in flower beds, that could be located either in the middle of a courtyard or at its edges. Wen Zhenheng explains that they should be planted “irregularly but in order” and, if necessary, must be supported by a wooden frame (2019, p. 32). Great efforts were made to take care of these plants: for example, when sunlight was too intense, they were covered with a cloth. Peonies were one of the main attractions in a Chinese classical garden, and even in the evening, when banquets were held, lanterns and candles were used to light them, thus allowing guests to fully appreciate their beauty (Wen, 2019, p. 32).

3.6.7 Flower appreciation in Chinese classical gardens

The appreciation of flowers was another of the main activities performed in Chinese classical gardens. Courtyards and pavilions were specifically dedicated to this activity, and the appreciation of certain species often constituted a pretext for holding a *yaji* or other kinds of gatherings, feasts and banquets.

Scholars took great care of their flowers, as described by Wen Zhenheng:

One tends flowers for a year to see them for only ten days; hence the need to shade them from the sun with screens and protect them with bells to scare the birds away. It is not just a question of splendid appearance. (2019, p. 31)

Indeed, it was not only about enhancing the beauty of the garden: the contemplation of flowers was part of the scholar’s self-cultivation. The spiritual value of this activity is described by writer Shen Fu (1763-1810):

I used to crouch down by the hollows and protrusions of the mud wall or among the tangled grasses and bushes on the raised flower beds, so that I was on the same level as the flower beds. Then I would compose myself and look closely, until the clumps of grass became a forest, the ants and other insects became wild beasts, the clods and pebbles which jutted up were hills, and those which sank down were valleys. My spirit roamed freely in this world and I felt completely at ease. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, p. 8)

The account written by British writer Osbert Sitwell of a party held in a garden of Beijing in 1934 is an ulterior proof of the depth and concentration that characterized the activity

of flower appreciation:

Once there [near the flowers], they [the Chinese participants to the party] would remain a long time, matching in their minds the complexion and fragrance of the blossom of previous years with that before them. Then, after the general examination of the crop came the more intimate tallying of one branch, one flower, one bud, with another, and finally it was necessary once more to consider the entire grouping and design. . . . Critical appreciation of this high order took time. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 7)

3.6.8 The Late Spring Annexe

The Late Spring Annexe is made of a three-bay structure that constitutes the main room, a smaller studio on the western side, a loggia and a terrace. It is located in a courtyard that is almost independent, a sort of “garden within the garden.” This space was mainly used by the garden owner as another study room, more secluded and thus more peaceful and quiet. On the northern wall of the main room, three windows frame balanced compositions of rocks, banana trees (fig. 3.6.h), plums (fig. 3.6.i) and bamboos (fig. 3.6.j) that look like paintings and act as a source of artistic inspiration. The sounds produced by these plants allow the garden owner to concentrate and study, and their symbolical meanings (the plum’s meanings will be discussed in section 3.8) constitute a moral example.

The Late Spring Annexe and its courtyard, however, were not only a place of solitary study and meditation, but also a perfect setting for gatherings, feasts and banquets. This happened especially in late spring, when the peonies bloomed, filling the courtyard with their elegant color and sweet fragrance. The very name of the Late Spring Annexe, in fact, is a reference to the season during which one can enjoy these beautiful flowers. Peonies are placed in flower beds located on the sides of the courtyard, in partial shade, so that they can grow properly (fig. 3.6.e).¹ The appreciation of these flowers in the Late Spring Annexe has been documented by Qian Yong (1759-1844) in his *Conversations from Within Footsteps Garden*, in which he describes his visit to the Master of Nets Garden, that occurred in 1818:

I visited the garden . . . in order to view the blooming herbaceous peonies. So splendid proved the flowers that they could rival those of the Five Foot Tower of Yangzhou. Fan Lizong wrote a poem on the occasion that included the couplet:
“A flurry of carriages of those come here to view the flowers,
Who now, one asks, bothers to visit the Chief Minister’s former home?” (as cited in

¹ The sources examined for this research agree on the fact that peonies were present in the courtyard of the Late Spring Annexe in the past, but it is not clear if that is still the case nowadays. Because of the restrictions put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has not been possible for the author to visit the Master of Nets Garden during the late spring of 2020 to verify this in person. However, the significance of this section of the research is not affected by this detail: the aim is to understand how the relationships between plants, space and life worked in pre-modern times, rather than how they work now that the Master of Nets Garden is a tourist attraction.

Campbell, 2007, p. 7)

The choice of this species as an object of appreciation in the Late Spring Annexe has several reasons. First of all, peonies are a symbol of glory, power, wealth and dignity, thus showing to guests and visitors the nobility of the garden owner and his family: these flowers can be defined as a sort of “status symbol.” Secondly, according to the Chinese tradition, they are considered one of the most beautiful flowers, to the point that they have become a symbol of beauty itself, and of beautiful women. Finally, they represent a powerful expression of Nature and, as a *yang* element, they are part of the cosmic balance of the Universe.

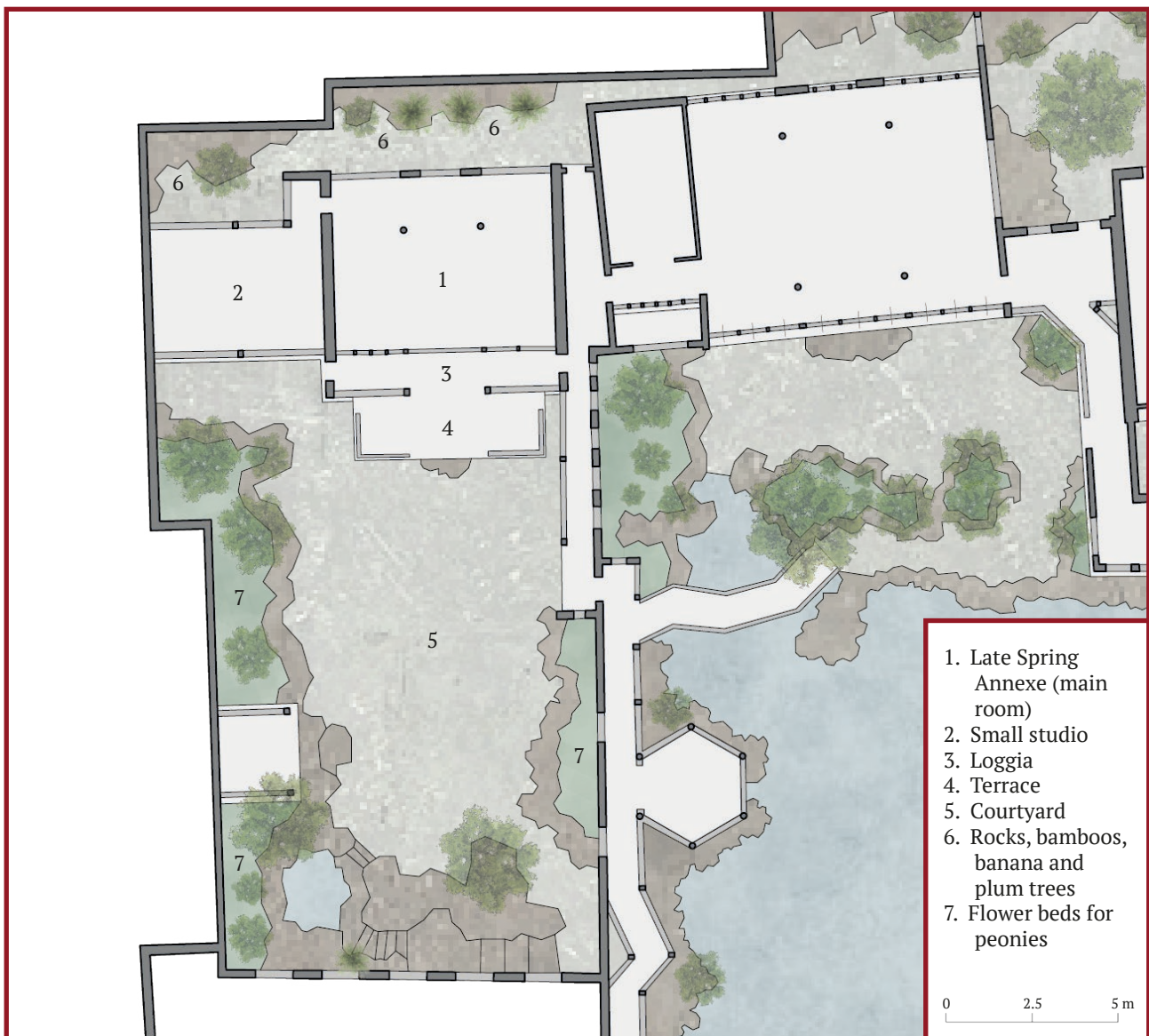


Fig. 3.6.d Plan of the Late Spring Annexe and its surroundings.



■ Fig. 3.6.e The Late Spring Annex and its peonies as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



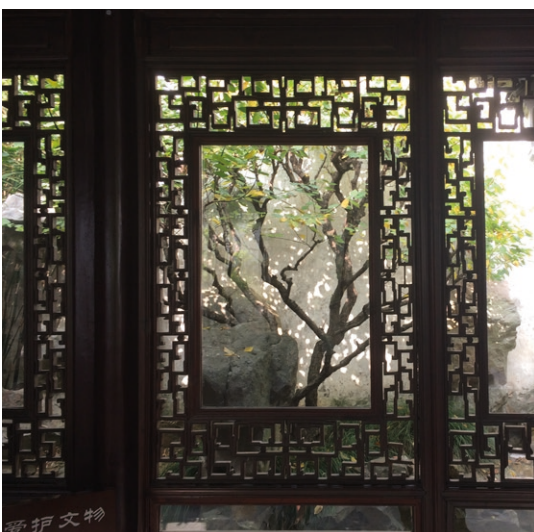
■ Fig. 3.6.f The Late Spring Annex and its large courtyard.



■ Fig. 3.6.g The courtyard of the Late Spring Annex with the flower beds for peonies.



■ Fig. 3.6.h A banana tree seen from a window of the Late Spring Annex.

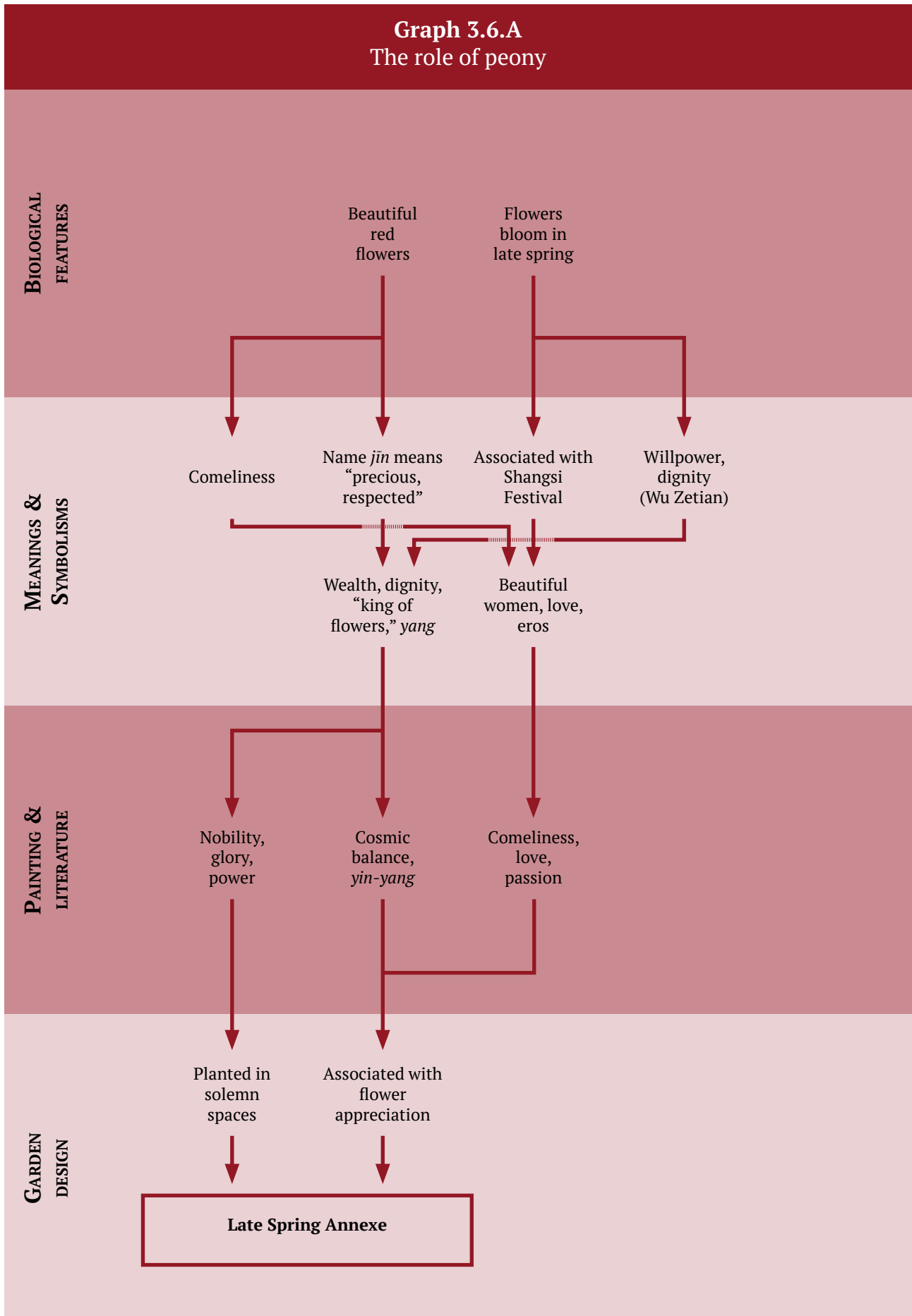


■ Fig. 3.6.i A plum tree seen from a window of the Late Spring Annex.



■ Fig. 3.6.j Some bamboos seen from a window of the Late Spring Annex.

Graph 3.6.A
The role of peony



3.7 THE RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS AND THE ROLE OF MAGNOLIA

The Residential Quarters are located to the east of the garden, and their layout follows principles that are radically different from those of their counterpart. In the series of courtyards that make up the space of the house, one can find scholar trees, magnolias and osmanthus. In this section, the significance of magnolias in Chinese culture will be explored, and their relationship with the space of the Residential Quarters and life in a traditional Chinese house will be discussed.

3.7.1 Magnolia: biology and history

Magnolias are deciduous flowering trees, belonging to the family *Magnoliaceae*.¹ In the Master of Nets Garden, there are two species of magnolia: *Magnolia denudata* and *Magnolia liliiflora*.

Magnolia denudata is commonly known as “Yulan magnolia” and “lilytree.” It is native to central and eastern China. This species can grow up to 9 meters tall. Its bark is dark gray. Its ovate leaves are 15 centimeters long and 8 centimeters wide. The flowers appear around March, before the leaves emerge, and they last until the end of spring. They are white, goblet-shaped and have a diameter of around 10 to 16 centimeters. The fruits are red and mature in late summer. *Magnolia denudata* usually grows in full sun or partial shade.

Magnolia liliiflora is commonly known as “Mulan magnolia” or “lily magnolia.” It is native to southwest China. This species can grow up to 2.5 to 4 meters tall. Its ovate leaves are 10 to 18 centimeters long and 5 to 13 centimeters wide. The flowers appear in early spring, before the leaves emerge. They are purple on the outside and white on the inside. *Magnolia liliiflora* usually grows in full sun or partial shade.

Cultivation of magnolias in China is registered at least since the 7th century. The first document that mentions these plants for their medicinal properties dates back to 1083.

3.7.2 Magnolia: meaning of the name

Magnolia denudata’s Chinese name is *yùlán* (玉兰). *Yù* (玉) means “jade,” but also “pure, fair, rich.” *Lán* (兰) means “orchid, magnolia,” but also “elegant, graceful.” This species is also known as *bái yùlán* (白玉兰), with *bái* (白) meaning “white, pure.”

Magnolia liliiflora’s Chinese name is *mùlán* (木兰). *Mù* (木) means “tree, timber, wood.” This species is also known as *mùbǐ* (木笔) with *bǐ* (笔) meaning “pen, pencil, brush.”

1 The family *Magnoliaceae* includes about 219 species.

3.7.3 Magnolia: symbolism

According to legends, in the past only the Emperor was allowed to grow magnolias in his garden. The flowers of this plant are considered a symbol of beauty, feminine sweetness, purity and nobleness.

On the 15th day of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar, the “Magnolia Festival” was celebrated. On this occasion, families used to make offerings to the god of the earth and to the spirits from the underworld. On the night before the festival, lanterns were hung around Buddhist temples or were put in boats made of paper, so that they could flow in rivers and lakes.

Magnolia liliiflora, whose Chinese name is *mùlán*, is associated to its homonym Huā Mùlán, a legendary female warrior from the Northern and Southern dynasties period. According to the story, she disguised herself as a man, took the place of her father in the army and fought for several years.

3.7.4 Magnolia: painting

Depending on the elements with which magnolias are combined, they can acquire different meanings in painting. When depicted with butterflies, they symbolize the quest of a man looking for love, while with bees they form a representation of self-esteem.

Magnolia denudata, whose Chinese name contains the character for “jade”, represents the “Jade Hall” (*Yutang*), that is the chamber, established at the time of the Han Dynasty, where high officials used to work.

Magnolia liliiflora, on the other hand, is known as *mùbǐ* (木笔), and can be related to the character *bì* (必), meaning “certainly, surely”: therefore, when depicted along with “longevity stones” it expresses the wish to “surely have a long life”.

Zhu Da (1626-1705), a Qing Dynasty painter and Daoist monk, depicted Yulan magnolias in many of his works. For him, they represented a means to keep his integrity. These paintings are characterized by plain, unadorned lines.

3.7.5 Magnolia: literature

Magnolias often appear in Chinese poetries as a symbol of beauty. An example is Li Qingzhao’s “Magnolia Flowers”:

From the flower vendor I bought
A sprig of spring just bursting into bloom-
Sprinkled all over with teardrops
Still tinged with traces of

Roseate clouds and morning dew.
Lest my beloved should think
I'm not so fair as the flower,
I pin it slanting in my cloud hair,
And ask him to see
Which of us is the lovelier:
The flower or I. (as cited in J. Wang, 1989, p. 27)

In these verses, the beauty of the flower is compared to that of the female poet. Besides, it can be noticed that the image of the magnolia is associated to that of dew: a recurrent combination in Chinese poetry. In fact, it is found also in the work of Qu Yuan (340-278 BCE), and in particular in “Encountering Sorrow”, the first poem in the classic poetry collection *Chu Ci* (“The Songs of Chu”):

In the morning I drank the dew that fell from magnolia:
At evening ate the petals that dropped from chrysanthemums. (as cited in C. Zhao, 2015, p. 23)

In the Chinese tradition, in fact, dew symbolizes purity and holiness. By drinking it, the poet can live a virtuous life. According to Wang Yi, these two verses are an expression of the *yin* and *yang* principles, with the act of drinking dew from the magnolia being “absolute *Yang*” and that of eating chrysanthemum petals representing the “essence of the center *Yin*” (Wai Keung Chan, 2012, p. 15).

Magnolias, moreover, as many other natural elements, can be a catalyst for contemplation of Nature and meditation, as in Wang Wei’s works. In “Mountain Valley Lily Magnolia Trees”, the poet creates an atmosphere of quietness and tranquility that can be associated to his practice of Chan Buddhism:

Tree tips like lotus flowers just above the water
In the mountains growing red flower buds.
Mountain canyon rivulets calm and serene, with no people to hear
One after another these flowers open for a while, and then fall. (as cited in Irelder, 2018)

3.7.6 Magnolia: garden design

Magnolias are usually planted in enclosed courtyards, so that their fragrant scent does not disperse and is propagated instead inside the surrounding pavilions and halls. In such spaces, this tree becomes often one of the focal points, while it is rarely used as peripheral planting.

According to Wen Zhenheng's *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, "Magnolias . . . may be planted in front of formal buildings" (2019, p. 32). In fact, they are commonly placed in the courtyards of the residential quarters of gardens, as is the case in Suzhou's "Couple Garden" (fig. 3.7.a). In this case, they are arranged symmetrically, according to the main axis of the house, and evoke the image of old men kowtowing to the visitor that walks through the center of the courtyard (Blundell Jones & Woudstra, 2014, p. 168; fig. 3.7.b).

The combination of osmanthus and magnolias, a common one in Chinese classical gardens, symbolizes prosperity (cf. paragraph 3.2.6), thus being appropriate for the courtyards of residential quarters, as can be seen in the Couple Garden, where these plants are the present in the first two courtyards of the house.

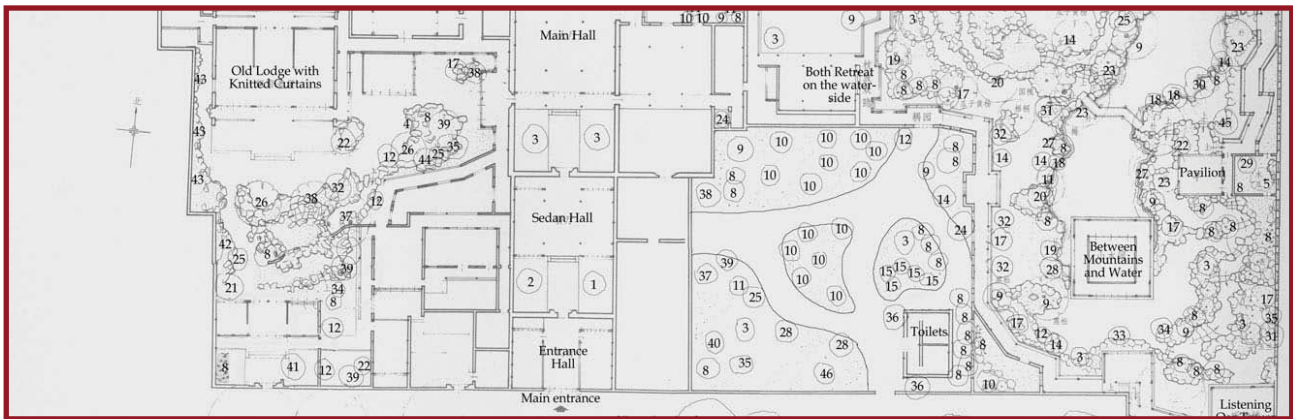
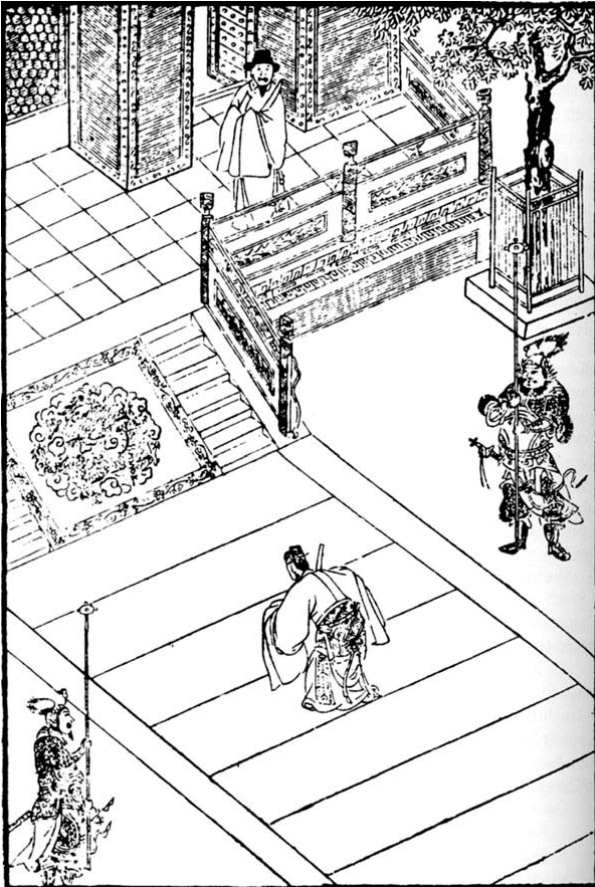


Fig. 3.7.a Survey of planting in the Couple Garden, from Liu Dunzhen, *Classical Gardens in Suzhou*, Beijing, 2005. Legend: 1 - *Magnolia denudata*; 2 - *Magnolia soulangiana*; 3 - *Osmanthus fragrans*.

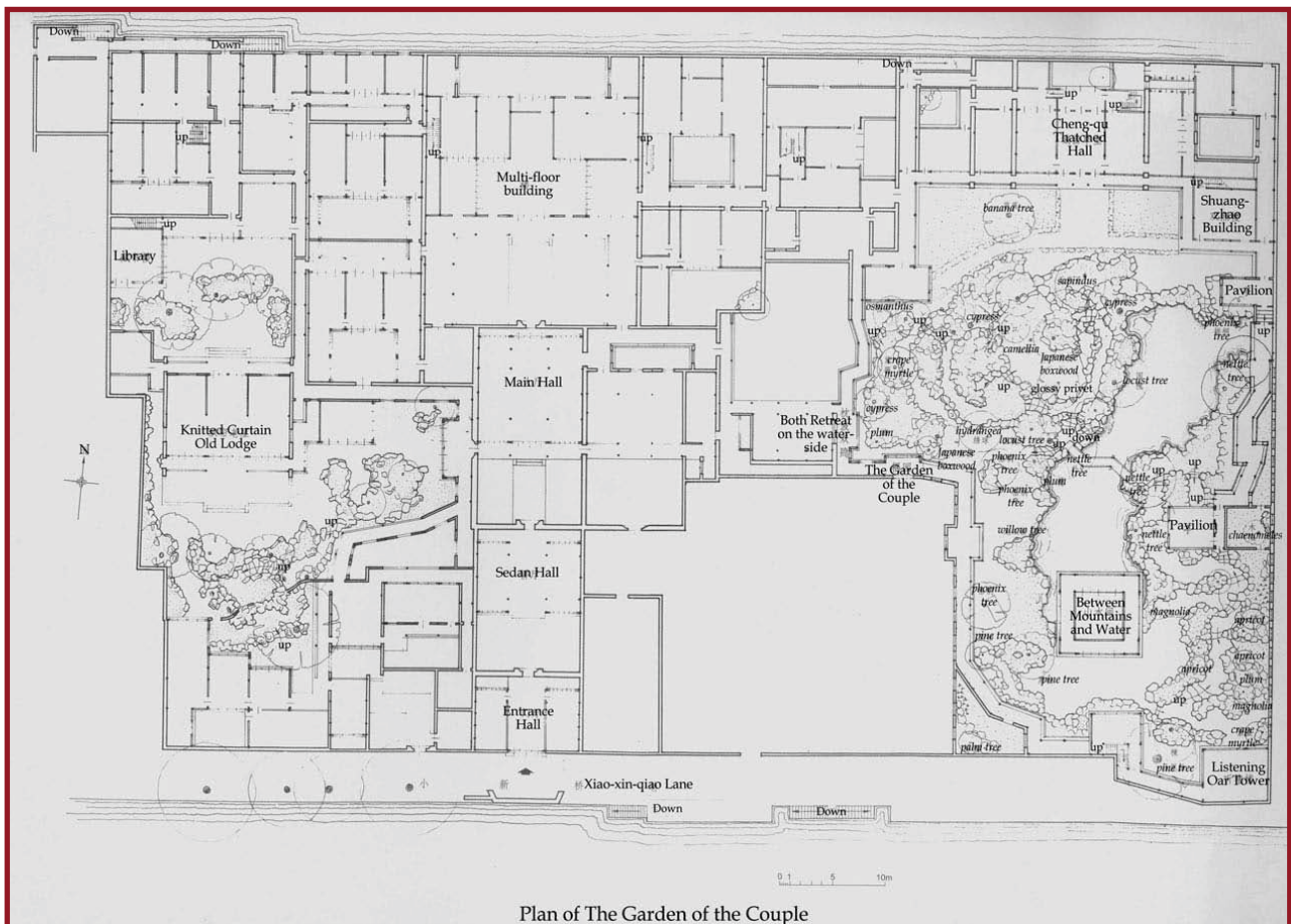


Fig. 3.7.b Sun Wen (c. 1818-1904), illustration from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Lüshun Museum, Dalian.



■ Fig. 3.7.c Woodcut illustration from the *Jin Ping Mei*.

■ Fig. 3.7.d Plan of the Couple Garden, from Liu Dunzhen, *Classical Gardens in Suzhou*, Beijing, 2005.



Plan of The Garden of the Couple

3.7.7 Life in a Chinese traditional house

A Chinese traditional house used to host an extended family, with members of three or four different generations all living under the same roof and, in the case of affluent households, several servants.

Residences were built with a north-south central symmetry axis, along which a series of halls and courtyards was aligned. The axis, however, did not constitute a continuous visual line, but was repeatedly severed. Screens and walls were placed at the end of each hall, creating in each room a “place of honor” that always faced south and could be occupied by the most important seat, by an ancestral altar or by a precious artifact. At the center of the house there was the most important hall, where the ancestors of the family were remembered and worshipped. Behind it, there were the private quarters dedicated to the female members of the family. The layout of the house can be described as series of enclosures of increased privacy, that gave the perception of an extremely deep space.

In the house, the behavior of people was determined by very strict rules. Formality permeated every aspect of the life in the house, even in the most private environments such as bedrooms. The system was centered around three basic hierarchical relations: the one between older and younger generations, the one between master and servant and the one between man and woman. One of the most visible expressions of this order was the extreme importance attributed to seating arrangements, a matter that, as described in novels such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was a constant concern (Blundell Jones & Woudstra, 2014, p. 155). Usually, the seat of honor was assigned to the host, while the most distinguished guest was placed to his right. Rules and rituals strongly influenced the design of traditional houses. During the Han Dynasty, for example, the main hall used to have two stairways: one on the right side for the host, and one on the left side for the guest, as prescribed by the *Liji*, the ancient “Book of Rites” (T. Li, 1992, p. 45). Therefore, it can be seen that the formality that reigned inside the house is the exact opposite of the freedom and informality that characterized the space of the garden.

One of the key features of Chinese traditional houses is the relationship between halls and courtyards. The latter, also called “heavenly wells” (Morris, 1983, p. 190), had the practical function of allowing light and air to reach the halls, as well as being an extension of the interior space. As can be seen in traditional paintings and illustrations, daily life often took place on the border between inside and outside (fig. 3.7.c).

The other essential role of courtyards was that of providing a clear view of the sky, ensuring thus a connection between the inhabitants of the house and Heaven. This can be seen in the following scene from *Dream of the Red Chamber*:

On the morning of his birthday Bao-yu rose at dawn, and after completing his toilet, put on his most formal clothes and went out to the main front courtyard of the mansion, where Li Gui and three other of his grooms were waiting for him by a table they had made ready with an incense burner and candlesticks and offerings as an altar to Heaven and Earth. Bao-yu lit some sticks of incense and made his prostrations, poured out a libation of tea, and burned the paper offerings and offertory scrolls. (as cited in T. Li, 1992, pp. 34-35)

In the Jiangnan region, traditional literati houses were usually composed of four halls: the main entrance, a space for sedan chairs, a reception hall and the private quarters. This arrangement can be seen very clearly both in the Master of Nets Garden and in the Couple Garden (fig. 3.7.d).

The entrance hall was connected to an external courtyard, where rings to tie up horses were placed on the walls. Distinguished guests, however, would not come on a horse, but would instead be carried on sedan chairs: this was the most common means of transportation for the literati, as remarked by Wen Zhenheng (2019, p. 123). Sedan chairs could be left in the second hall of the house. Here, guests would wait to be announced to the host. With his permission, they could proceed to the most important and formal environment of the house: the reception hall, where a display of decorated furniture, paintings, calligraphies, stones, vases and other precious artifacts would show them the wealth and sophistication of the family. Finally, the last building, that usually had two floors, was a private space, accessible only to the family, its servants and close friends. This was the space where women used to spend most of their time, as normally they could not enter the reception hall. It should be noted that, in this series of spaces, gates were usually oriented inwards rather than outwards, with elaborate decorations positioned on the northern side, to be seen on departure rather than on arrival. Their role was not that of announcing the next space; instead, they acted as a part of the courtyard, establishing a visual relationship with the place of honor of the adjacent hall. Finally, one last element of the Jiangnan literati house is constituted by a series of alleys and passages positioned on the sides of the halls and courtyards: they allowed servants to easily move through the house, but they were also used by the family as a fast and direct connection between the spaces of the house.

3.7.8 The Residential Quarters

The residential quarters of the Master of Nets Garden follow the traditional arrangement: a sequence of halls and courtyards positioned along a central axis.

First, before entering the property, one encounters a semi-private courtyard, embedded in Suzhou's dense fabric of narrow alleys. It is defined by whitewashed walls on all sides.

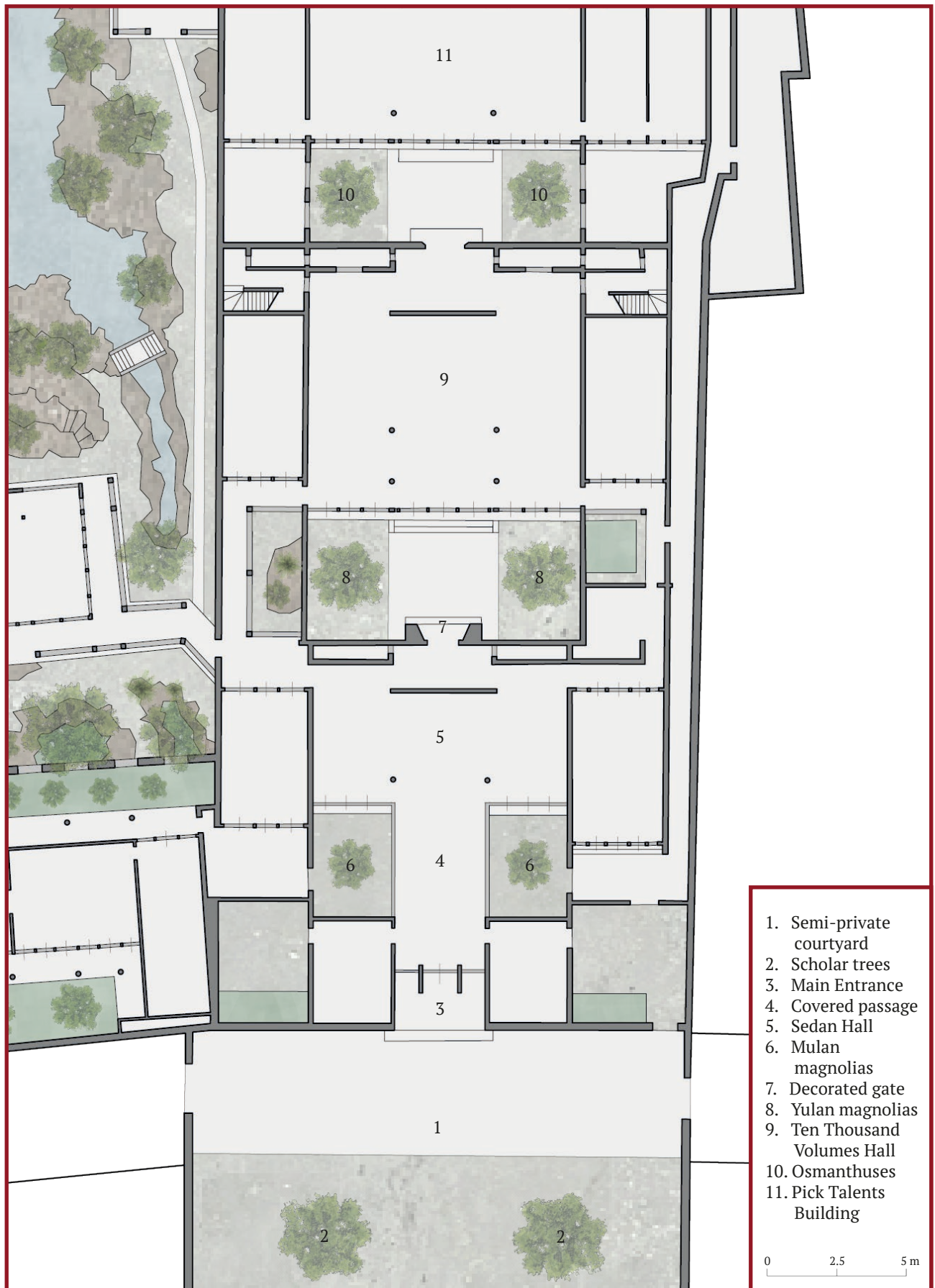
The gate of the house is on the northern side, and in front of it there are two scholar trees (figs. 3.7.g-h). The Main Entrance hall is a three-bay structure, with two small side rooms. A covered passage connects it to the Sedan Hall, giving the impression that these two elements constitute a single building, while in fact they are two separate structures. On the two sides of the covered passage, there are two small courtyards, each containing a *Magnolia liliiflora* tree (fig. 3.7.i). The Sedan Hall is a three-bay building that displays a mahogany sedan chair (fig. 3.7.k) from the period of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

From the Sedan Hall, one crosses a gate decorated with finely carved bricks that represent scenes of court life (fig. 3.7.j) and reaches a courtyard planted with two specimens of *Magnolia denudata* (fig. 3.7.l). The next building is the main reception hall, called Ten Thousand Volumes Hall (figs. 3.7.m-n). It has three bays and contains several precious artifacts: calligraphic tablets, poetic couplets, inkbrush paintings, elegant stones, rock screens and porcelain vases. The last courtyard of the sequence contains two osmanthus trees, and the last hall is a two-story structure with six bays, named Pick Talents Building (figs. 3.7.o-q).

The vegetation that can be found in the residence's courtyards has been chosen according to three criteria: first, it had to thrive in a partially shaded environment and have dimensions suitable for the scale of the different spaces; second, it had to have a sweet scent that would fill the courtyards and the adjacent halls; third, its meaning had to be appropriate for a formal setting. For each species, two specimens have been planted, respecting the general symmetry of the residence and enhancing the idea of a central axis.

The scholar tree has been chosen for the Main Entrance because it conveys calmness and tranquility to the guests and visitors entering the residence, and because it is usually planted where it can “shade a doorway.”

Magnolias and osmanthus are traditional choices for residential courtyards, as they are often used in formal settings. As discussed in paragraph 3.7.6, they characterize other houses of Suzhou, like the one in the Couple Garden. Their combination, called *liangguidangting* (cf. paragraph 3.2.6) symbolizes prosperity, making them an ideal solution for a residential context. In fact, magnolias mean purity, nobleness, quietness and tranquility, while osmanthus represent wealth, honor and ambition. Moreover, magnolias are associated to a festival dedicated to the spirits of the dead, making them an appropriate choice for the main reception hall, where ancestors would be venerated. Finally, the combination of magnolia and osmanthus has a cosmic significance, as the former represents the *yang* principle while the latter is associated to the *yin*. This is reflected by the functions of the related spaces: *yang* for the reception hall, where public meetings were held, usually involving men, and *yin* for the private building dedicated to women.



■ Fig. 3.7.e Plan of the Residential Quarters and their surroundings.



■ **Fig. 3.7.f** The Residential Quarters as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 3.7.g** The Main Entrance and the semi-private courtyard in front of it.



■ **Fig. 3.7.h** The scholar trees in front of the Main Entrance.



■ **Fig. 3.7.i** A Mulan magnolia in a small courtyard between the Main Entrance and the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 3.7.j** The decorated gate on the northern side of the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 3.7.k** Mahogany sedan chair in the Sedan Hall.



■ Fig. 3.7.l Yulan magnolia in the in front of the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall.



■ Fig. 3.7.m View of the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall from the courtyard in front of it.



■ Fig. 3.7.n A Yulan magnolia seen from inside the Ten Thousand Volumes Hall.



■ Fig. 3.7.o Osmanthus tree in front of the Pick Talents Building.

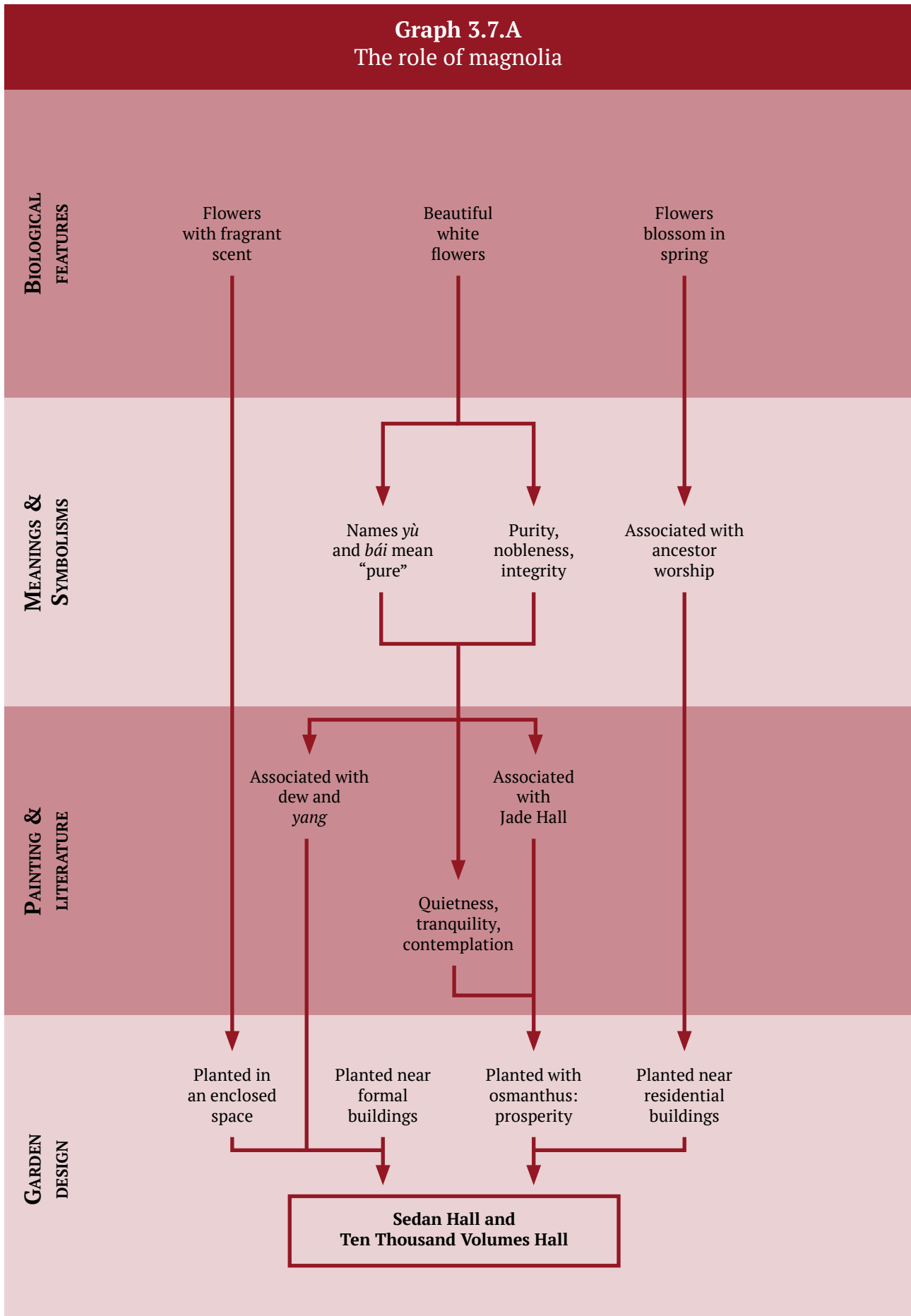


■ Fig. 3.7.p Interior of the Pick Talents Building.



■ Fig. 3.7.q Osmanthus trees in front of the Pick Talents Building.

Graph 3.7.A
The role of magnolia



3.8 THE ROSY CLOUD POOL AND THE ROLE OF PLUM

The Rosy Cloud Pool is located in the middle of the garden. Around it, a variety of buildings can be found, each of them with a different role: one for drinking tea, one for contemplating fish, one for watching the moon. The magical atmosphere of the lake makes it also a perfect place for romantic encounters. Among the vegetation that fills its shores, there are a Chinese plum, a cherry plum, two crape myrtles and some creepers and vines, while the pond itself contains several water lilies. In this section, the significance of plums in Chinese culture will be explored, as well as that of cherry plums, crape myrtles, water lilies, creepers and vines. The relationship of these plants with the space of the Rosy Cloud Pool and the multiple activities practiced around it will be discussed.

3.8.1 Plum: biology and history

Prunus mume is a deciduous flowering tree, belonging to the family *Rosaceae*.¹ It's commonly known as “Chinese plum” or “Japanese plum.” It is native to southern China.

This species can grow up to 4 to 10 meters tall. Its oval leaves are 4 to 8 centimeters long and 2.5 to 5 centimeters wide, with a serrulate margin and a pointy tip. The flowers appear between February and March, before the leaves emerge. They are white, pink or red, with a diameter between 2 and 2.5 centimeters. The drupes mature between June and July. They are yellow, with a diameter between 2 and 3 centimeters. *Prunus mume* grows especially well in full sun, but also in partial shadow.

Prunus mume was domesticated around three thousand years ago (Q. Zhang et al., 2012). It was cultivated both for its ornamental value and its culinary uses. At the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it was considered a plant with a very high economic value and was sold door to door. Techniques were elaborated in order to make it blossom as early as possible (Clunas, 1996, p. 41).

3.8.2 Plum: meaning of the name

Prunus mume's Chinese name is *méi* (梅). It is composed of the character *měi* (每), meaning “each, every,” and the radical *mù* (木), meaning “tree, timber, wood.” It is also known as *lǐ* (李), a character composed of *zǐ* (子), meaning “offspring, child, fruit” and the radical *mù* (木): an allusion to the many fruits produced by the tree.

¹ The family *Rosaceae* includes around 4,828 species, among which there are apples, pears, cherries, plums, apricots, peaches, strawberries, almonds and roses.

3.8.3 Plum: symbolism

The symbolisms associated to the Chinese plum are based on its biological characteristics: the white color of its flowers represents moral purity, its resistance to cold symbolizes courage and integrity, and its fragrance recalls a kind of noble aloofness from vulgar things. The fact that this tree is the first to bloom in late winter makes it a powerful symbol of rebirth, endurance and hope. At the same time, because its blossoms and petals fall after a short time, it is also associated with the transiency of life.

Chinese plum's flowers have five petals: therefore, they can be considered a symbol of the five gods of prosperity and the five good fortunes. This plant is also associated with the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar and is a symbol of winter. It is often used in decorations for the Spring Festival. Many other meanings are associated to it: longevity, beauty, strength, the life of the hermit. It can be combined with bamboo and pine to form the "three friends of winter." It is also said that Laozi was born under a plum tree.

The Chinese plum can be considered a representation of cosmic balance, with its gnarled trunk representing the principle of *yang* and its delicate blossoms being an expression of *yin*.

3.8.4 Plum: painting

Plum blossoms were one of the favorite subjects in Chinese traditional painting. A whole genre was dedicated to this plant, "ink plum painting," started at the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) by Monk Zhongren (c. 1051-1123). Whole manuals were dedicated to this technique such as the *Manual of Plum Blossom Portrait Painting* by Song Boren (b. 1197).

Some painters dedicated huge parts of their work and time to the depiction of this plant. One of them was Jin Nong, who returned to this subject several times in the course of his life, exploring a wide range of techniques in order to convey his feelings and reflections. His research culminated in *Plum Blossoms* (fig. 3.8.a). The poem associated to the painting reads:

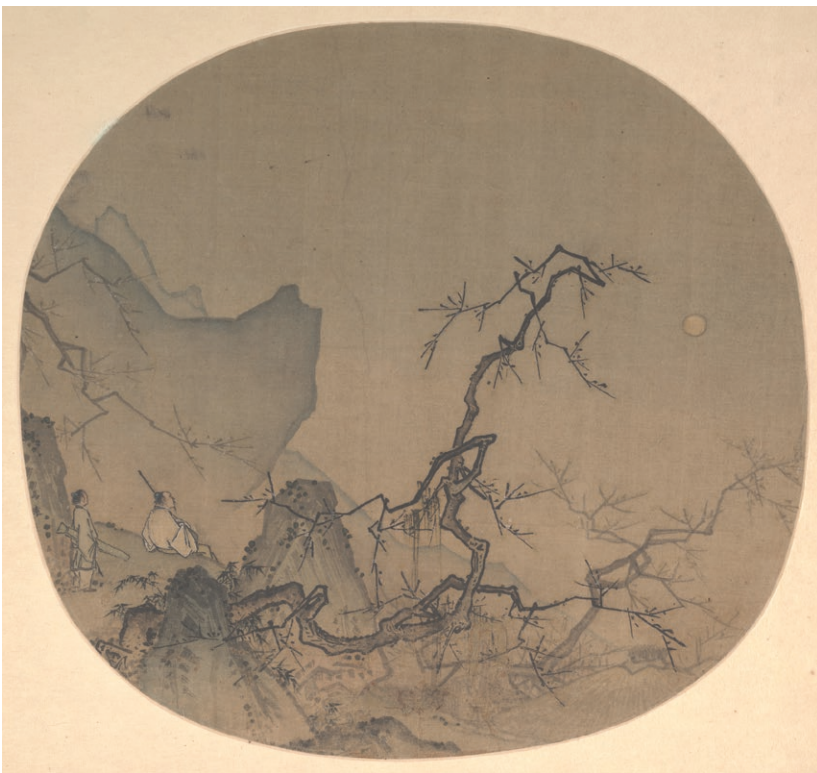
The older the plum tree, the more ascetic it becomes.
At the mountain tower by the river inn is a man, wretched and poor.
Purity becomes complete when cold fills every crevice,
And only now do I know that we were once the bright moon. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, p. 122)

Here the plum tree is a symbol of the old man: bitter and aged, but its spiritual essence shines brightly. The image depicted serves as an evocation of moral principles.

The association of plum blossoms and moon was actually quite common. Another re-



■ **Fig. 3.8.a** Jin Nong (1687-1773), *Plum Blossoms*, 1757, 25.4 x 29.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.8.b** Ma Yuan (active c. 1190-1225), *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight*, 25.1 x 26.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



■ **Fig. 3.8.c** Xu Jing (15th century), *The Pure Whiteness of Winter*, 149.5 x 76.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

markable example is *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight* (fig. 3.8.b) by Ma Yuan.

When a plum is represented covered with snow, instead, it becomes a powerful symbol of rebirth and purity, as in Xu Jing's (15th century) *The Pure Whiteness of Winter* (fig. 3.8.c), painted in 1441.

3.8.5 Plum: literature

Plum blossoms started to gain a prominent role in Chinese poetry at the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). They are especially associated with the figure of Lin Bu (967-1028). In fact, this poet spent his life as a hermit on an island in Hangzhou's West Lake, surrounded by a grove of plum trees and accompanied by a couple of cranes. He said that the plum flower was "his wife" and his two birds were his children. Plum blossoms were, of course, one of his favorite subjects for poetry, as demonstrated by his masterpiece "Small Plum Tree in a Garden in the Hills":

When all other flowers have fallen, it alone shows warmth and beauty
Taking charge of all romantic feeling in the small garden.
Spare shadows slant across waters that are clear and shallow,
Hidden fragrance hangs and drifts under a moon hazy and dim.
The frosty bird wants to alight but steals a glance at it first,
If powder-dabbed butterflies knew of it, their hearts would break.
Luckily, chanting poetic lines softly I'm able to befriend it,
No need for the singing girl's clappers or a golden goblet of wine. (Cai & Cui, 2012, poetry n. 76)

In these verses, Lin Bu achieves the difficult goal of depicting a well-known subject in a different light, defamiliarizing it and creating new images and feelings. He does so by focusing on the reflection of the blossoms in the pond, shifting the point of view to that of a bird, and stimulating multisensoriality.

The multi-sensorial dimension is what characterizes also Wang Anshi's (1021-1086) "Plum Blossom":

In the wall corner a cluster of plum flowers
defying the winter cold put forth their solitary blossoms.
From a distance one can tell it isn't the show of a snow shower
Only because from there wafts their subtle fragrance. (Cai & Cui, 2012, poetry n. 77)

Here, it is only thanks to an olfactory perception that the poet is able to recognize that the white patches on the wall corner are plum blossoms and not just snow.

A symbolic meaning that is often associated to plum trees in Chinese poetry is that of nostalgia for one's home. An example is Song Zhiwen's (656-710) "Inscribed on the Wall of

an Inn North of Dayu Mountain”:

They say that wild geese, flying southward,
Here turn back, this very month...
Shall my own southward journey
Ever be retraced, I wonder?
...The river is pausing at ebb-tide,
And the woods are thick with clinging mist –
But tomorrow morning, over the mountain,
Dawn will be white with the previous hit plum next hit – trees of home. (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

Finally, Chinese plum’s symbolism of renewal and rebirth plays an important role in poetry too. Shitao, for example, wrote the following verses as a metaphor of the periods of “winter and renewal” of his career as a painter:

Their hidden fragrance touches and awakes the poet –
When their marvelous beauty blooms, it makes an old man feel the spring.
My feelings are so full, it is almost unbearable –
These passions don’t come often, yet still I am lonely.
At dawn I scratch my head in wonder in front of the courtyard looking [at the flowers]:
How could anybody think that I am only and old useless scholar? (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 174)

3.8.6 Plum: garden design

The value of the Chinese plum is recognized both in the *Yuan Ye*, that describes it as the “beautiful woman of the forest and the moon” (as cited in Dudbridge & Berg, 2007, pp. 56-58), and in Wen Zhenheng’s *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, where plum blossoms are said to be companions of the “man of elegant remoteness” (2019, p. 34).

When creating a Chinese classical garden, plums and pines were usually the first trees to be planted. Pavilions were specifically dedicated to the Chinese plum, where one could enjoy its fragrant scent. Other were designed to allow the contemplation of this plant at night, under the moonlight. Wen Zhenheng suggests transplanting old specimens of *Prunus mume*, with twisted trunks and bark covered with lichens, “amongst rocks and in courtyard borders” (2019, p. 34).

According to R. Stewart Johnston, a plum tree, in order to be considered beautiful, had to show the following features:

- 1) The trunk should have the appearance of an old man’s body, crooked and bent with age.
- 2) The main branches should be gnarled – forming knees and angles.

- 3) The twigs must be in a certain order.
- 4) Their position must give the impression of force; it is the energy that is admirable.
- 5) The blossoms should be wonderful, full of charm. Nor should they be too dense. (1991, p. 67)

3.8.7 Cherry plum

Prunus cerasifera is a deciduous flowering tree, belonging to the family *Rosaceae*. It is commonly known as “cherry plum.” Its native range includes south-eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Western Asia. It can grow up to 8 to 12 meters tall. Its ovate leaves are 3 to 7 centimeters long. Its flowers appear between February and April. They are white or pink, with a diameter of about 2 centimeters. Its drupes mature between July and September. They are red or yellow, with a diameter between 2 to 3 centimeters. This species grows especially well in full sun, but also in partial shade.

Prunus cerasifera’s Chinese name is *yīngtáo* (櫻桃). The character *yīng* (櫻) means “cherry” and is composed of *yīng* (嬰), meaning “baby, infant,” and the radical *mù* (木), meaning “tree, timber, wood.” *Táo* (桃), on the other hand, means “peach.”

Traditionally, cherry plums are associated with women and female beauty, but also with feminine dominance, power and strength. They are a powerful symbol of passion and sexuality, with the red fruits reminding of a woman’s lips. In Chinese, the expression “eating cherries” is a euphemism for “making love.” In this plant, the cosmic balance is represented by the *yin* aspect of delicacy and purity and the *yang* character of nobility.

The poetry *A Lovely Girl Combing Her Hair* by Li He (790-816) describes a young woman spending hours doing her hair just to go alone to pick cherry blossoms in her garden. The verses are characterized by a sensuous and desirous tone:

Xi-shih dreaming at dawn,
 In the cool of silken curtains,
 Scented coils of her falling chignon,
 Half aloes and sandalwood.
 ...
 She loosens her tresses before the mirror,
 Stands by her ivory bed.
 A single skein of perfumed silk,
 Clouds cast on the floor,
 Noiseless, the jade comb lights upon
 Her lustrous hair.
 ...
 Her coiffure over, the well-dressed chignon
 Sits firm and does not slip.
 In cloudy skirts, she takes a few steps,

A wild goose trading sand,
She turns away in silence –
Where is she off to now?
Just down the steps to pick herself
A spray of cherry blossom. (Ward, 2008, p. 71)

3.8.8 Crape myrtle

Lagerstroemia indica is a deciduous shrub or small tree, belonging to the family *Lythraceae*. It is commonly known as “crape myrtle.” Its native range includes India, the Himalayas, China, Korea, Japan and South-East Asia. It can grow up to 3 to 8 meters tall. Its bark is smooth and pink-gray. Its leaves are small and circular or oval. They shed in winter, after turning yellow, orange and red, in a spectacular color display. Flowers appear in summer, in panicles up to 9 centimeters long. They are white, pink, red or purple. This species usually grows in full sun.

Lagerstroemia indica's Chinese name is *zǐwēi* (紫薇). *Zi* (紫) means “violet, purple,” while *wēi* (薇) means “vetch, rose” and is composed of the character *wēi* (微), meaning “tiny, little,” and the radical *cǎo* (艹), meaning “grass.”

Because of their purple flowers, crape myrtles have always been associated to the imperial family and have been called “sage of flowers.” According to legends, the polar star transformed into a crape myrtle in order to protect the people from the *nian*, a ferocious beast, and to bring peace and happiness to the world. During the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties, crape myrtles were planted in the courtyard of the Central Secretariat, the highest administration of the State, in the Imperial Palace, and this organ was even renamed “Crape Myrtle Secretariat.” This plant became a symbol of authority and was nicknamed “official flower.”

The poet Bo Juyi, who served as secretary in the Central Secretariat, praised this plant in his poem “Crape Myrtle”:

Below the Silk Thread Pavilion,¹
Silence among the letters and documents,
Bells and drums within tower, the clepsydra shows the lateness.
Sitting alone in the dusky twilight – who will be my companion?
Crape myrtle flowers face to face with an administrative secretary. (as cited in Cahill, 1996, p. 27)

In these verses, crape myrtles represent a way for the poet to forget for a moment his bureaucratic duty and enjoy the contemplation of Nature.

1 The Silk Thread Pavilion was where imperial rescripts were drafted.

Crape myrtles are often found in Chinese classical gardens. According to Wen Zhenheng, they should be planted in “hill gardens” and are “best viewed at a distance” (2019, p. 36).

3.8.9 Water lily

Nymphaea is a genus of perennial water plants, belonging to the family *Nymphaeaceae*, generally referred to as “water lilies.”¹ It has a cosmopolitan distribution.² It has round leaves and cuplike flowers, with petals arranged in spirals.

The Chinese name for water lilies is *shuilián* (睡莲). *Shuì* (睡) means “sleep, lie down,” while *lián* (莲) means “lotus.”

The meaning of this plant is similar to that of lotus: as both of them grow from mud but show beautiful flowers on the water surface, they are a metaphor for people that keep their noble character and virtues despite living in a stagnant environment. They are also a symbol of purity, renovation and rebirth.

Water lilies are associated to summer and they often appear in love poems. An example is Li Bai’s “Ballads of Four Seasons: Summer”:

On Mirror Lake outspread for miles and miles,
The lotus lilies in full blossom teem.
In fifth moon Xi Shi gathers them with smiles,
Watchers overwhelm the bank of Yuoye Stream.
Her boat turns back without waiting moonrise
To loyal house amid amorous sighs. (*Tang Shi San Bai Shou*, 1997)

Water lilies are frequently found in the lakes of Chinese classical gardens. Wen Zhenheng recommends that they “should not cover the whole pond and obscure sight of the water” (2019, p. 49). In fact, the development of water plants is carefully controlled so that they do not hide the reflections of buildings and especially so that they do not ruin the effect of unlimited space that water is intended to suggest.

Although lotuses are the preferred plant when it comes to lakes and ponds in Chinese classical gardens, water lilies are chosen when the space is small: as they have smaller leaves, they seem to be farther away than they actually are, thus giving the impression that the pond is wider. For the same reason, sometimes lotuses and lilies are both planted in the same lake, with the former positioned in the middle and the latter placed near shores and bridges.

1 The family *Nymphaeaceae* includes about 70 species.

2 Plants with a cosmopolitan distribution are those whose range extends across most of the world.

3.8.10 Creepers and vines

Around the Rosy Cloud Pool, there are two species of creepers and vines worth mentioning: *Wisteria sinensis* and *Hoya serpens*.

Wisteria sinensis is a deciduous flowering vine, belonging to the family *Fabaceae*, generally referred to as “legumes.” It is commonly known as “Chinese wisteria.” It is native to China. It can grow clinging to supporting plants or man-made structures. Its pinnate leaves are 10 to 30 centimeters long. Flowers appear in late spring, before leaves emerge. They are white, violet or blue. This species usually grows in full sun or partial shade. *Wisteria sinensis*’s Chinese name is *zíténg* (紫藤). *Zi* (紫) means “purple, violet”, while *téng* (藤) means “vine, creeper plant.”

Hoya serpens is an evergreen perennial vine or shrub, belonging to the family *Apocynaceae*, generally referred to as “dogbanes.”¹ It is commonly known as “waxplant.” It is native to the Himalayas. Its round leaves are 1.5 to 2 centimeters long. Its flowers are fuzzy, with a green corolla and a white corona. It usually grows in full sun or partial shade.

Hoya’s Chinese name is *qiúlán* (球兰). *Qiú* (球) means “sphere, globe, ball,” while *lán* (兰) means “orchid, magnolia.”

Traditionally, creepers and vines are thought to intensify the meaning and significance of the elements near them. This is because the Chinese name for this kind of plants, *wàn* (蔓), sounds like *wàn* (万), that means “ten thousand.” For the same reason, they are also a symbol of immortality. Furthermore, Chinese wisteria bears the meaning associated to the purple of its flowers, so it is associated to the imperial family.



■ **Fig. 3.8.d** After Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *Old Wisteria Among Trees and Rocks*, 63.5 x 29.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

1 The family *Apocynaceae* includes around 5100 species.

In paintings, vines and creepers can be a representation of the inexorable passing of time. In *Old Wisteria among Trees and Rocks* (fig. 3.8.d) by Wen Zhengming, for example, a flowering wisteria vine surrounds the dead trunk of a tree. It is an oppressive image, as remarked by the poem that accompanies the painting:

An ancient vine, a hundred feet long, suspends its clear shade,
An urgent wind, blowing rain, sweeps over.
Horses and carriages do not alarm me; my heart is like water.
Only now do I perceive that within city walls is the red dust. (as cited in Barnhart, 1983, p. 66)

3.8.11 Drinking tea in Chinese classical gardens

Since the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), tea has played a crucial role in the life of Chinese literati. In his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, Wen Zhenheng dedicates an entire chapter to the appreciation of this beverage and of incense. In its first lines, he explains why these two elements are so important:

The benefits of incense and tea are extensive. The hermit, detached from the material world, pondering virtue and the way, may by their use clear the mind and gladden the heart. At dawn and dusk, when the spirit falters, they ease the soul and allow one to burst into song. When copying a rubbing by a window during the day, or reciting and conversing to the gestures of a fly whisk, or reading by a lamplight at night, they have the capacity to banish sleep. In intimate conversations with grey gowns and red sleeves they can aid passion and inflame ardor. Behind closed shutters on a rainy day or walking after a meal they can rid us of loneliness and vexation. They can quench the thirst and revive the spirits after a drunken banquet, or when talking at night by the window, or whistling in an empty chamber, or playing the qin and performing music. (2019, p. 143)

Tea accompanies many of the typical literati activities, and has the properties of influencing mood, keeping one awake and enhancing amorous passion. Most importantly, it can inspire peace and tranquility, creating a state of mind ideal for contemplating Nature and merging with the cosmic flow. For this reason, several paintings depict literati drinking tea in a natural setting. An example is *Making Tea in the Forest* (fig. 3.8.e), by Wen Zhengming, in which a scholar is preparing the beverage while sitting under a great tree, surrounded by grass and rocks.

Drinking tea was an essential activity performed in Chinese classical gardens. As such, it often required pavilions specifically designed for it. An example can be seen in another painting by Wen Zhengming, titled *Tasting Tea* (fig. 3.8.f). In it, a scholar and his guest sit in a small pavilion, talking and drinking tea. Around them there are mountains, trees, and a



■ Fig. 3.8.e Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *Making Tea in the Forest*, 84.1 x 26.4 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



■ Fig. 3.8.f Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *Tasting Tea*, 88.3 x 25.2 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

stream: the typical atmosphere of a reclusive garden.

As numerous scholars have pointed out in the course of the centuries, the taste of tea is enhanced by the beauty of the landscape and vice versa: the art of drinking tea and garden culture are thus inextricably connected.

3.8.12 Watching the moon in Chinese classical gardens

Chinese classical gardens are spaces that were lived at all times: not only during the day but also at night. Indeed, under the moonlight, they acquired a special charm, especially with a full moon or a new moon, times of deep spirituality.

From a symbolical point of view, the moon was closely related with the element of water. They are both incarnations of the *yin* principles, but, at the same time, water is also related to the sun, as it catches and reflects sunlight, thus also containing a *yang* aspect. Pavilions were built near the lakes and ponds of the gardens so that one could contemplate both the moon and its reflection on water. This image appears in the *Yuan Ye*:

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 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. (as cited in J. Cooper, 1977, pp. 4-5)

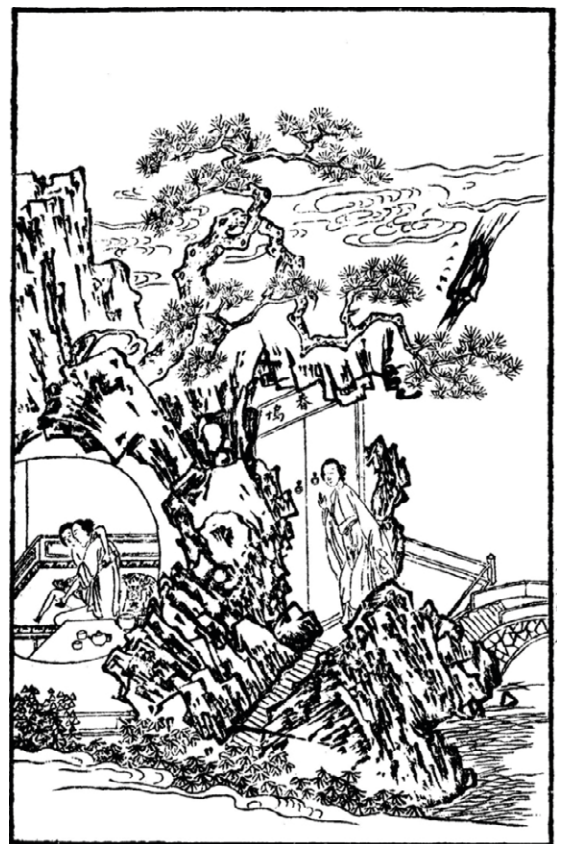
It was common to stay awake all night in the garden, watching the moon. It could be the scholar, alone, contemplating and meditating, or there could be a gathering with the purpose of celebrating the moon. Both these possibilities are represented in Shen Zhou's paintings.

In *Enjoying the Mid-Autumn Moon in the Bamboo Villa* (fig. 3.8.g), painted in 1489, a gathering of scholars is depicted, with everyone seated in the Pavilion of Peace of Shen Zhou's garden. They are celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival, the most important celebration dedicated to the moon in the Chinese tradition. An atmosphere of melancholy dominates the composition, and characterizes also the verses that accompany it, that contain a reflection on the transience of life:

In my youth, I saw the Mid-Autumn moon,
As no different from any other moon.
In old age, I grew fond of it.
Loving the moon means also to love the fine autumn feast.
How many more Mid-Autumn feasts can an old man enjoy?
In truth, time flows on and cannot be detained. . . . (as cited in Lee, 2006, pp. 50-51)



■ Fig. 3.8.g Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Enjoying the Mid-Autumn Moon in the Bamboo Villa*, 1489, 29.3 x 92 cm.



■ Fig. 3.8.h Woodcut illustration from the 22nd chapter of the *Jin Ping Mei*.

■ Fig. 3.8.i Shen Zhou (1427-1509), *Sitting Alone at Night*, 1492, 84.8 x 21.8 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

In *Sitting Alone at Night* (fig. 3.8.i), painted in 1492, instead, Shen Zhou represents a scholar sitting alone in a pavilion under the moonlight and practicing meditation. He describes the state of mind attained by the depicted character in the adjacent inscription:

... How great is the strength to be gained sitting in the night. Thus, cleansing the mind, waiting alone through the long watches by the light of a candle becomes the basis of an inner peace and of an understanding of things. (as cited in Lee, 2006, p. 54)

3.8.13 Romantic encounters in Chinese classical gardens

Chinese classical gardens were a perfect spot for romantic encounters. In the erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei*, Ximen Qing, the protagonist, often uses the spaces of his private garden to engage in sexual intercourse with his numerous wives and lovers.

In chapter 22, for example, he copulates with Song Huilian, wife of one of his servants, in a grotto located in the garden, described as “very quiet and an excellent place . . . to meet”, where nobody could see them (Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, 1610/2011, vol. 1, p. 279). They are, however, discovered by Pan Jinlian, the fifth wife of Ximen Qing (fig. 3.8.h).

Chapter 27 is also set in the protagonist’s garden: its very title, in fact, is “The Garden of Delights.” It starts with Ximen Qing sitting by the “Kingfisher Hall,” one of the buildings of his garden, defined as a “summerhouse,” where he is watching his servants water the flowers. He gets intimate with Li Ping’er, his sixth wife, on a long summer couch inside the hall. Later, he remains alone with Pan Jinlian:

Jinlian strummed the zither for a while. . . . She saw how freshly the pomegranate flowers were blooming after the rain, and laughingly plucked one and set it in her hair. . . . She laid the instrument beside a flower bed. . . . He sat her down among the flowers, and kissed her lips. (Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, 1610/2011, vol. 1, pp. 334-335)

In these lines, it can be noticed how the presence of flowers enhances the romantic atmosphere of the moment. Then, Pan Jinlian suggests to his husband that they go to the “Arbor of the Vines,” where one of the most famous scenes of the entire novel takes place. Ximen Qing ties the ankles of his wife to the trellis and engages with her in sexual games involving plums.

To sum up, the elements of the garden offered privacy (the grotto), created a romantic atmosphere (the flowers) and, in some cases, could even play a practical role during sexual intercourse (the trellis and the plums).

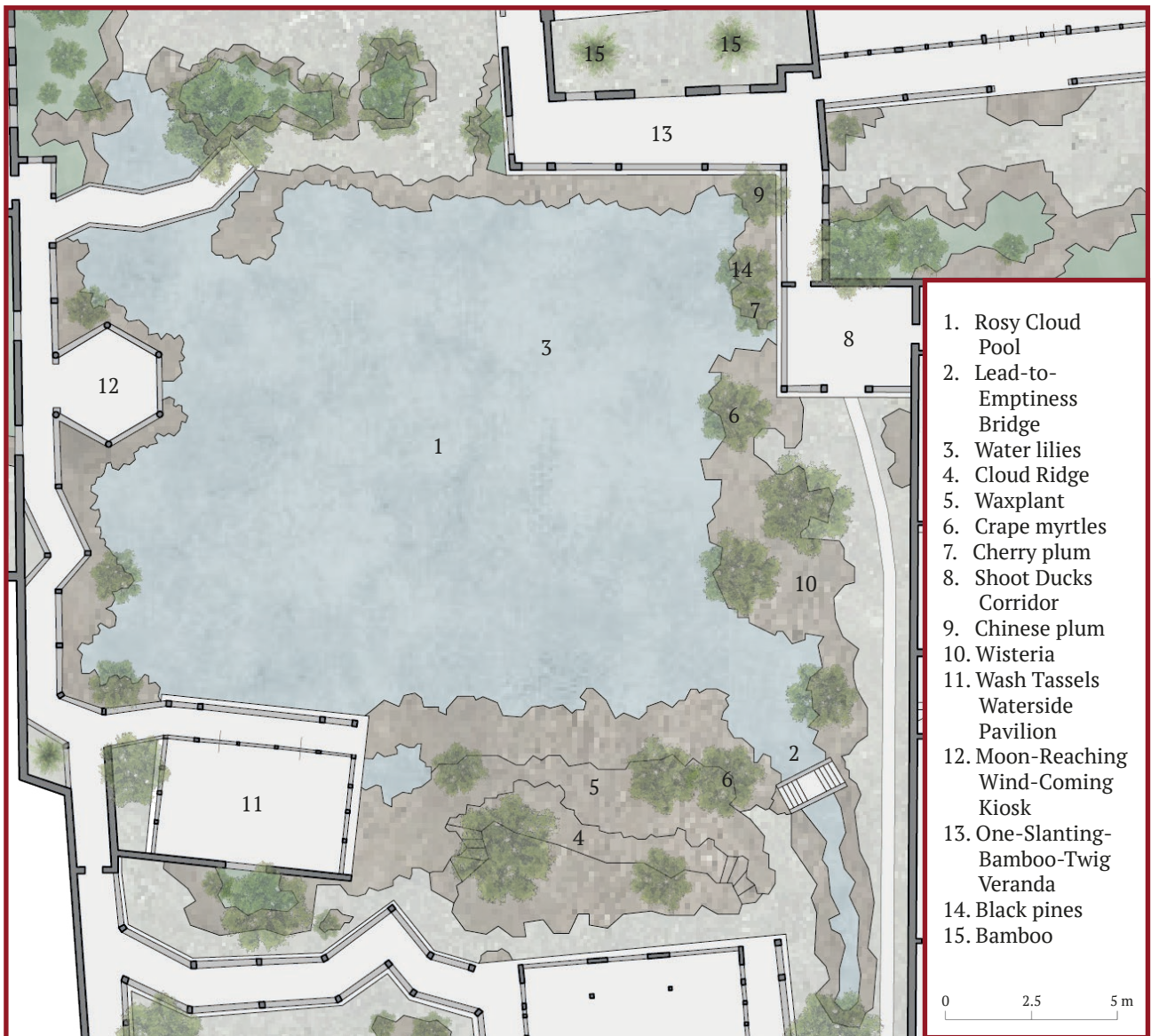


Fig. 3.8.j Plan of the Rosy Cloud Pool and its surroundings.



Fig. 3.8.k The water lilies in the middle of the Rosy Cloud Pool.



Fig. 3.8.l The waxplant on the Cloud Ridge.

3.8.14 The Rosy Cloud Pool

The Rosy Cloud Pool is located right in the middle of the Master of Nets Garden. It divides the southern part, dedicated to social activities, from the northern one, characterized by intellectual purposes, thus comprehending somehow both these vocations. The functions of the buildings around the pool, in fact, are drinking tea, contemplating fish and watching the moon: activities that can be performed both alone, as intellectual exercises, or in company, as moments of socialization.

The perception of the space of the Rosy Cloud Pool is altered thanks to a series of techniques that make the place seem much bigger than it actually is. First of all, near the water there are only small buildings, while the bigger ones (Small-Hill-Osmanthus-Grove Veranda and Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda) are hidden by small hills. The scale of these elements, as well as that of the tiny Lead-to-Emptiness Bridge, create the illusion that the lake is larger. Besides, small buildings can have a full reflection on the water, enhancing this effect even more. Vegetation plays its role as well: water lilies have been planted in a limited quantity and in a strategic position, so that the reflections of the buildings are not hidden (fig. 3.8.k). These plants have been chosen instead of the more common lotuses because their smaller leaves contribute to making the lake seem bigger. The waxplant on the Cloud Ridge achieves the same effect: its tiny round leaves make the rockery look almost like a real hill (figs. 3.8.l-m). As this species is a vine, it also amplifies the meaning of the mountain and highlights its timelessness.

The Rosy Cloud Pool is an ideal place to contemplate Nature: besides water and mountains, the fundamental elements of the Chinese conception of landscapes, a variety of plants has been planted all over its shores. The species that have been chosen are suited to grow in full sun and, with their diverse colors and shapes, they create elegant views during the four seasons. The crape myrtle, in particular, is significant, as it is associated with the idea of an official having a break during his work in order to enjoy Nature: this is exactly the purpose of the whole garden for the scholars who owned it. As suggested by Wen Zhenheng, the two crape myrtles that can be found around the pool are located near hills or rockeries (fig. 3.8.m).

The shores of the Rosy Cloud Pool are also the perfect place for romantic encounters. The presence of water creates a magical atmosphere, while the water lilies that grow in the middle of the lake symbolize love and the cherry plum located on the eastern side suggests thoughts of beauty and sensuality (fig. 3.8.n).

Around the lake, four buildings can be found, each of them associated to a specific season. Each of them will be analyzed, outlining their shape, function and related vegetation.



■ **Fig. 3.8.m** Detail of the tiny leaves of the waxplant on the Cloud Ridge.



■ **Fig. 3.8.n** Crape myrtle near the Cloud Ridge.



■ **Fig. 3.8.o** Cherry plum on the eastern side of the Rosy Cloud Pool.



■ **Fig. 3.8.p** View of the Shoot Ducks Corridor and the surrounding vegetation in late summer.



■ **Fig. 3.8.q** View of the Shoot Ducks Corridor and the surrounding vegetation in autumn.



■ **Fig. 3.8.r** People drinking tea under a crape myrtle full of white flowers.

First of all, the Shoot Ducks Corridor, associated to spring (fig. 3.8.p-q). While its name comes from a game played by scholars at the time of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the purpose of this building was to be a quiet place where to drink tea (an activity traditionally associated with spring) while enjoying the beautiful scenery of the Rosy Cloud Pool (fig. 3.8.r). It is a square structure located on the eastern side of the lake, as east is the cardinal point that represents the first season of the year, according to Chinese traditions. The building is surrounded by plants that blossom one after the other from late winter to early summer, so that one could enjoy a variety of colors and scents during the different phases of spring, and so that one could be inspired by several moral values. First, the Chinese plum, with its white flowers: a symbol of purity, integrity, hope and prosperity. Then, the cherry plum, whose pink blossoms are associated to delicacy and nobility. Third, the wisteria, a vine that represents the passing of time and whose purple flowers are a symbol of the imperial family. Finally, the crape myrtle, with white blossoms that express a wish for peace and happiness. The whole composition can spark reflections on self-development, as well as perceptions of the cosmic flow of the Universe, enhanced by the taste of tea.

The second building, associated with summer, is the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion (fig. 3.8.s). It is a three-bay structure located on the southern shore of the Rosy Cloud Pool. South is the cardinal point associated with summer, but this position has also a practical purpose: the building is open to the North, so that people staying in it during the hot season would enjoy the view of the lake without being hit by the strong rays of the sun. A feeling of coolness is also provided by the fact that the pavilion is, in part, literally over the water, with two pillars of its foundations plunging right into the pool. While staying in this building, one can watch the water lilies (fig. 3.8.t), plants that blossom during summer, and contemplate the fish that swim in the lake (figs. 3.8.u-v). This was, in fact, one of the literati's favorite pastime. Wen Zhenheng, in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, lists the moments in which it is best to look at fish: before sunrise, at night, when there is breeze and after rain (2019, p. 61). The Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion, however, has a strong moral meaning. Its name, in fact, comes from the poem "The Fisherman" of the collection *Chu Ci*. It narrates the story of Qu Yuan, an upright official who was unjustly banished. He encounters a fisherman, who sings the following advice:

When the Canglang's waters are clear,
I can wash my hat-strings in them;
When the Canglang's waters are muddy,
I can wash my feet in them. (as cited in Makeham, 1998, p. 193)

The hat-strings, or tassels, cited in the verses and in the pavilion's name are a symbol of



■ **Fig. 3.8.s** The Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion with water lilies in front of it.



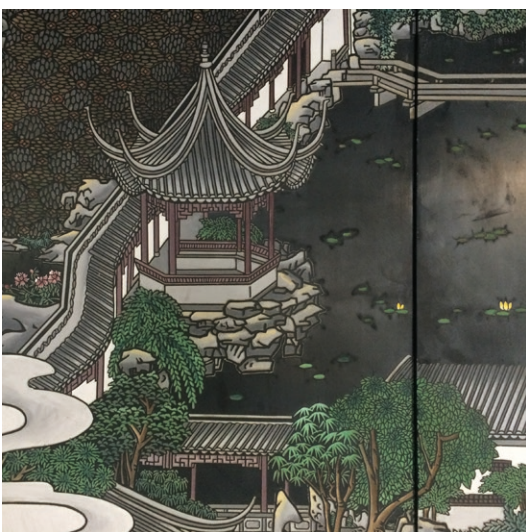
■ **Fig. 3.8.t** View of the Rosy Cloud Pool and its water lilies from the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion.



■ **Fig. 3.8.u** The loggia of the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion, from which one can watch the fish in the pool.



■ **Fig. 3.8.v** Goldfish swimming in the Rosy Cloud Pool.



■ **Fig. 3.8.w** The Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk as depicted in the Sedan Hall.



■ **Fig. 3.8.x** View of the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk.

the officials, and the meaning of the fisherman's song is that one should take office in favorable times and decline office in troubled times. This was a Confucian idea, and it has been used by the garden owner as an allusion to the fact that he had to retire from office because he was living in troubled times. It is also a reference to the "Canglang Pavilion," a famous garden of Suzhou located not far from the Master of Nets Garden: by establishing an association with it, the garden owner hoped to appropriate in part its long tradition and fame. The same Confucian virtue expressed by the name of the Wash Tassels Waterside Pavilion is also symbolized by the water lilies in front of it, reminders of moral integrity and rebirth.

The third season, autumn, is represented by the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk (figs. 3.8.w-x). The origin of its name can be found in a couplet by Han Yu (768-824):

As the hue of the evening brings with it the autumn,
A strong wind speeds on the moon. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 23)

The purpose of this building is to be a place for watching the moon, an activity strongly associated with the Mid-Autumn Festival. It consists of a hexagonal structure, attached to a covered walkway and positioned on the western side of the Rosy Cloud Pool. Again, the cardinal point is related to the season that the building is meant to represent. From the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk, one has a perfect view of the sky, where the moon would be, and of the lake, where its reflection would be, but also of the plum tree located near the Shoot Ducks Corridor, a plant strongly associated with the moon. The combination of these elements allows the viewer to engage in a deep contemplation of Nature and the cosmic balance of *yin* and *yang*. During the day, when the moon would not be visible, the people sitting in this pavilion can still enjoy the bright autumnal colors of the leaves of the cherry plum and crape myrtle trees located exactly in front of it, on the opposite side of the Rosy Cloud Pool (fig. 3.8.y). The former, in fact, develops a dark red-purple foliage (fig. 3.8.aa), while the leaves of the latter become of a bright yellow (fig. 3.8.ab).

The fourth building, the Watch-Pines-Appreciate-Paintings Veranda, has already been analyzed in section 3.4. There is, however, another smaller structure on the northern side of the Rosy Cloud Pool that can be considered related to winter: the One-Slanting-Bamboo-Twig Veranda (figs. 3.8.ac-ad). Its name comes from a couplet by Su Shi:

Upon river bank, in a thousand trees, spring begins to darken,
Beyond the bamboos a single branch sticks out, more beautiful for its slant. (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 23)

The building is also known as "*Prunus mume* Pavilion" because of the plum tree planted in front of it. Even though it is just a simple stretch of a covered pathway and has no specific



■ **Fig. 3.8.y** View of plants with autumnal colorful foliage from the Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk.



■ **Fig. 3.8.z** The Moon-Reaching-Wind-Coming Kiosk.



■ **Fig. 3.8.aa** Dark red-purple leaves of the cherry tree in autumn.



■ **Fig. 3.8.ab** Bright yellow leaves of the crape myrtle in autumn.



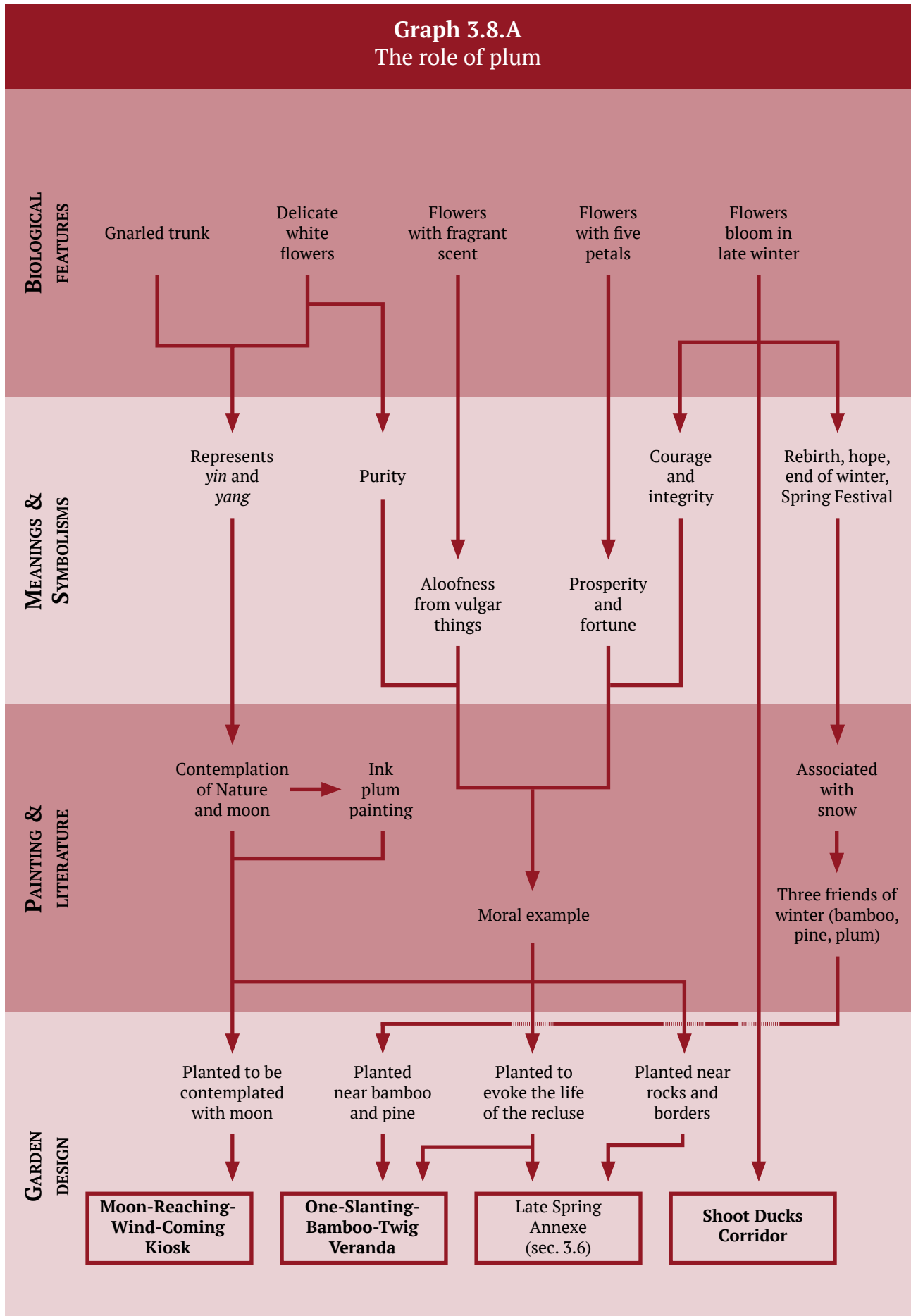
■ **Fig. 3.8.ac** The One-Slating-Bamboo-Twig Veranda as depicted in the Sedan Hall.

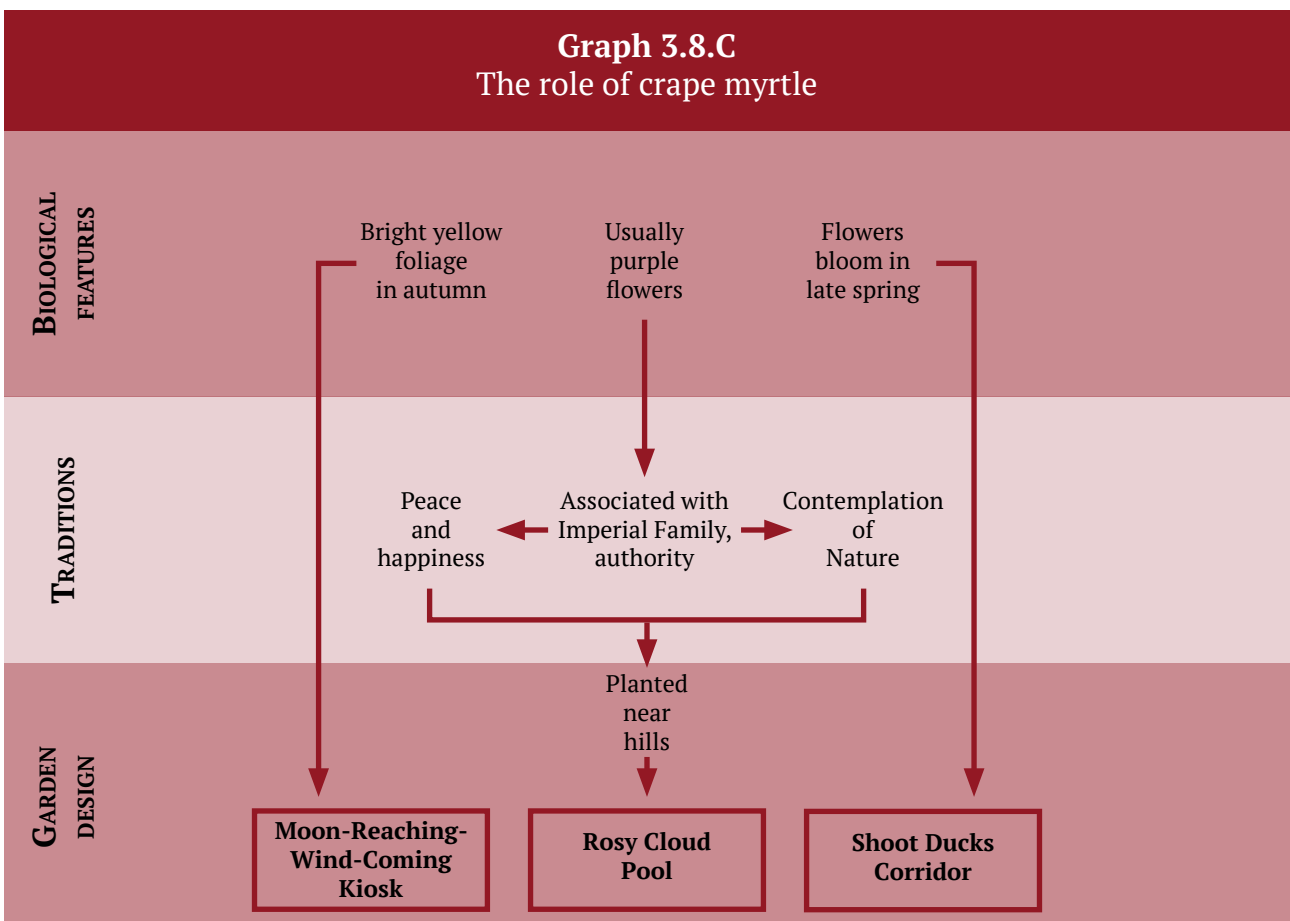
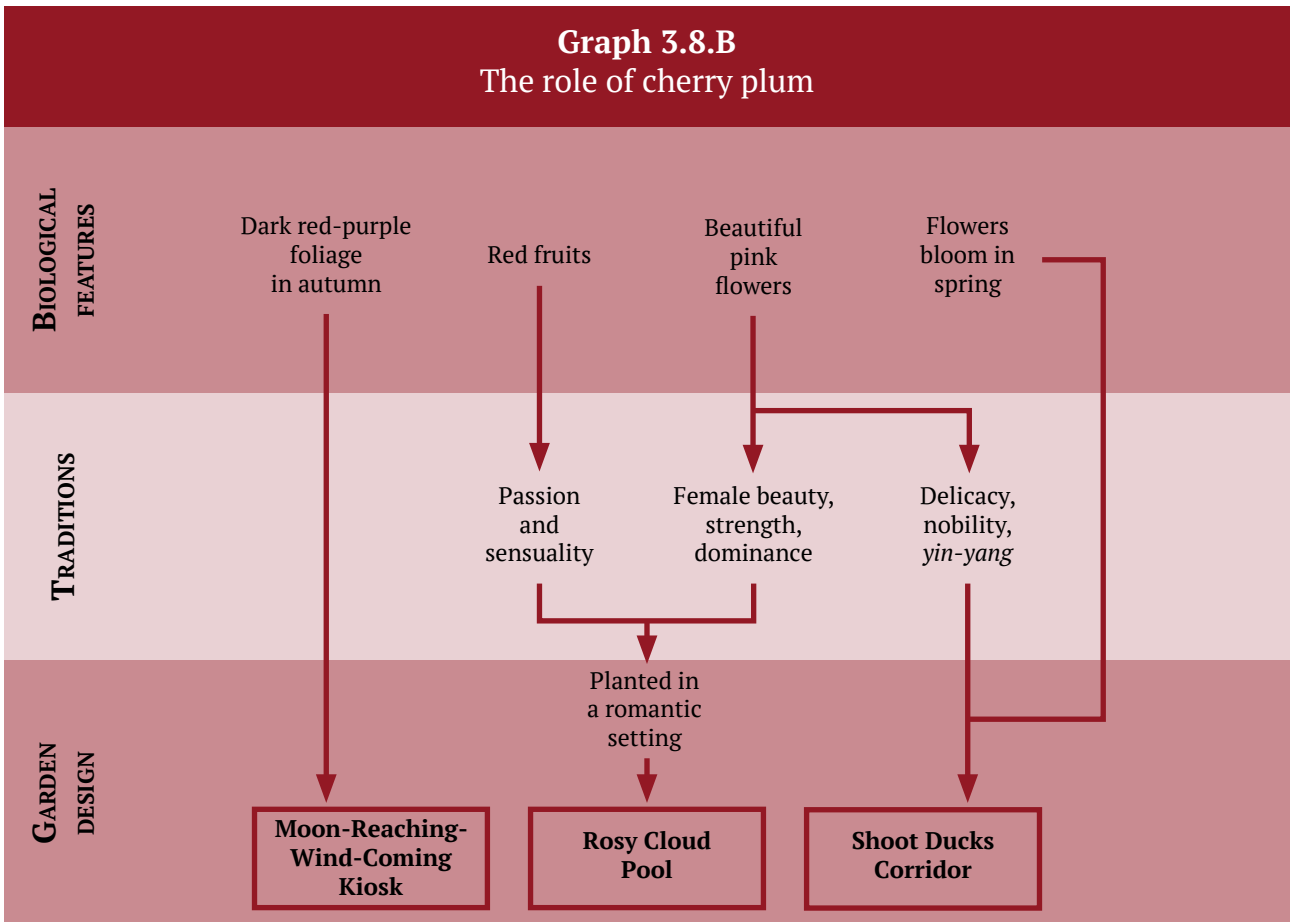


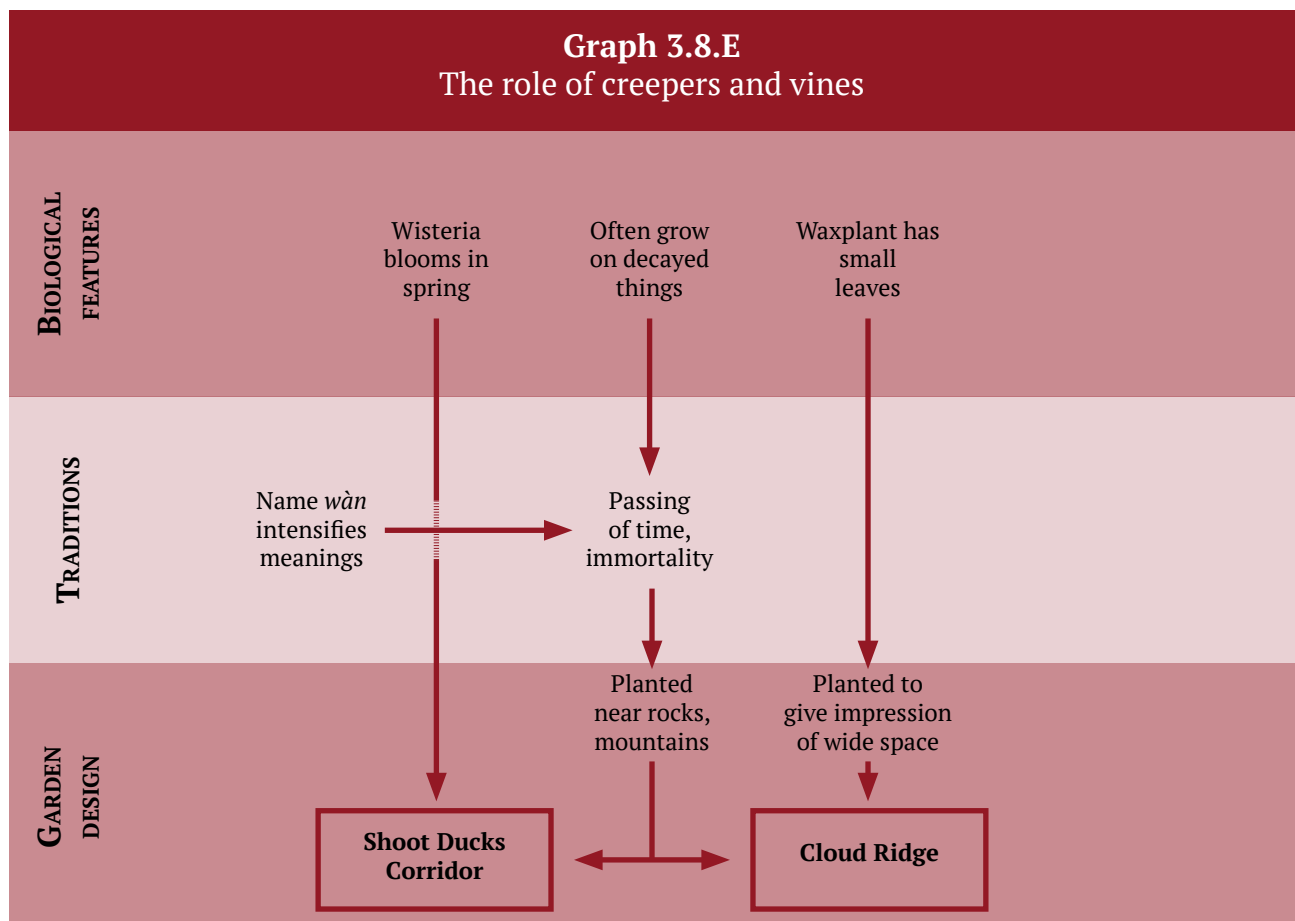
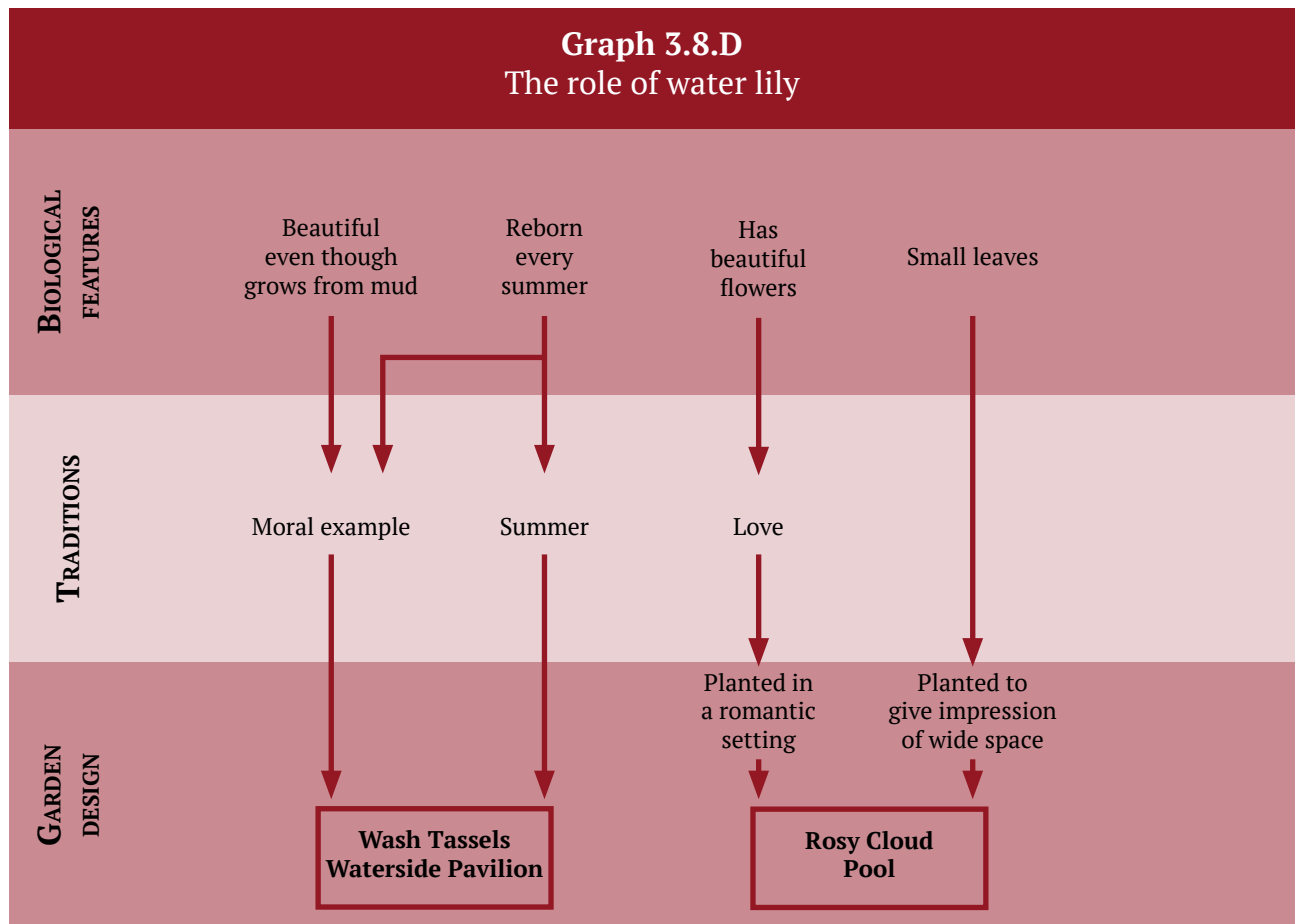
■ **Fig. 3.8.ad** The One-Slating-Bamboo-Twig Veranda, a pine and a plum tree.

functions, this place is very interesting from a symbolical point of view, as it is located between a plum tree and a pine on the lake side, and the two clumps of bamboo described in section 3.1 on the opposite side. These three plants (of which two, the bamboo and the plum, are mentioned in the names of this building) create the traditional combination known as “the three friends of winter.” The One-Slanting-Bamboo-Twig Veranda, therefore, is a place where one is inspired by the powerful meanings and symbols represented by these plants, examples of morality and virtue that would act as catalysts for self-improvement.

Graph 3.8.A
The role of plum







4. EAST AND WEST

4.1 A COMPARISON

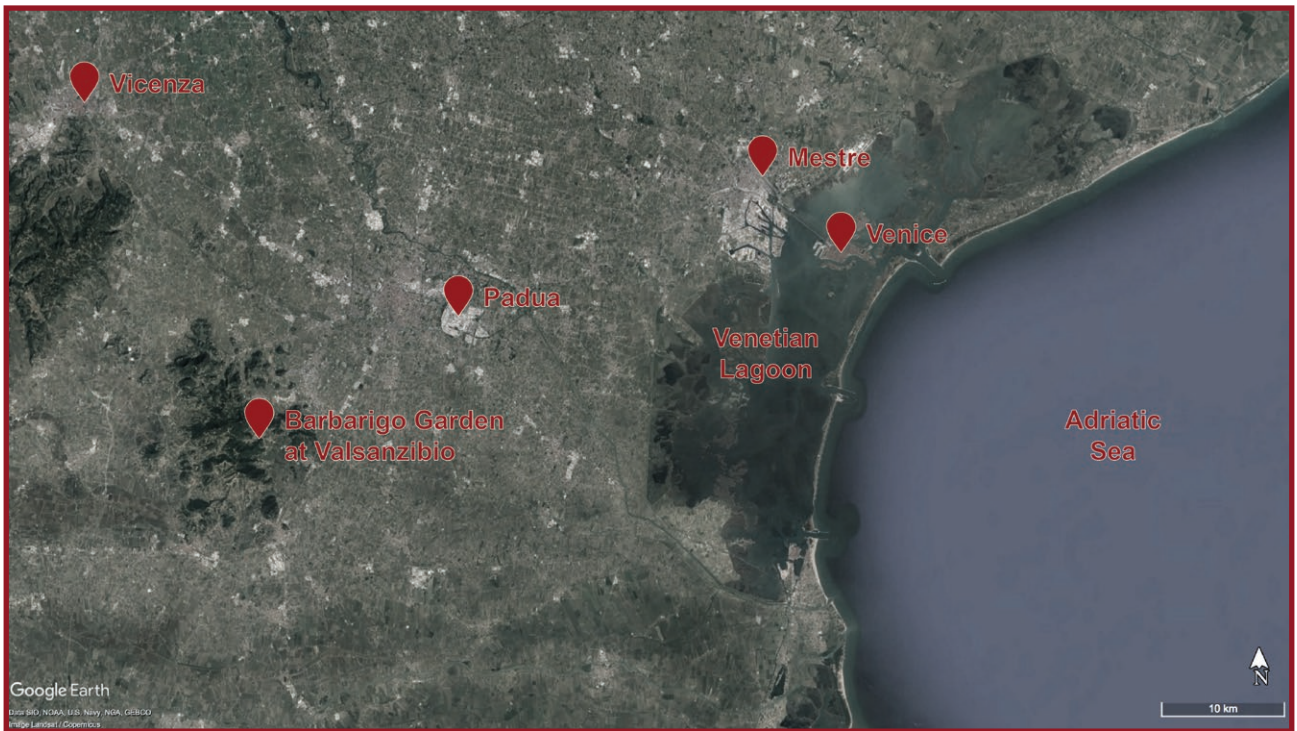
In order for the analysis of the Master of Nets Garden to be complete, it seems useful to compare it to another garden, that belongs to a completely different culture and tradition. This way, the peculiarities and distinctive traits of Chinese classical gardens will become evident and it will be easier to identify the principles that distinguish the traditional Chinese way of approaching Nature from the Western one. In fact, as Renaissance humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) said, “all things are known by comparison” (1435/1970, book 1).

In the present chapter, the Master of Nets Garden will therefore be compared to an Italian Renaissance garden. There are two main reasons for this choice:

1. There are very deep differences between Italian Renaissance gardens and Chinese classical gardens, so a comparison between these two traditions will likely make even more evident their unique features;
2. Renaissance is the beginning of Modernity, so by understanding the relationship between Humankind and Nature in that period one can better comprehend the causes of the ideological and environmental problems that humanity faces today, and therefore devise more effective strategies in order to solve them, which is the final aim of this research.

Specifically, the Master of Nets Garden will be compared with the Barbarigo Garden, a 17th century private garden located in the province of Padua, about 45 kilometers southwest of Venice (fig. 4.1.a). It has been selected because its background is quite similar to that of the Master of Nets Garden, so the comparison seems particularly appropriate: they are both private gardens made by cultured members of the ruling elite, their current layouts were created around the same time (one in the 17th century and the other in the 18th), and they both display rich and complex symbolisms that also involve plants.

In the following sections, the Barbarigo Garden will be studied according to a logic similar to that adopted in chapter 2 for the Master of Nets Garden, although in this case the analysis will be presented in a more brief and synthetic way. There will be a study of the context in which the garden was created, its history, its description, and an overview of the elements of which it is composed and of the patterns of space and movement that inform it. After that, the relationship between four particular sections of the garden and four plant



■ Fig. 4.1.a Location of the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio.



■ Fig. 4.1.b Satellitar view of the Barbarigo Garden and its surroundings.

species that have been grown in those sections will be analyzed. Again, the same logic adopted for the Master of Nets Garden (chapter 3) will be followed, but the analysis will be more brief and synthetic, outlining just the most relevant elements and considerations. Finally, everything will be summed up in section 4.10 by comparing the main features of the two gardens.

4.2 CONTEXT

In order to fully understand the Barbarigo Garden, it is necessary to outline the general characters of the Renaissance, a key period in European history, defined by a flourishing of the arts and the economy. It was at that time that the foundations of Modernity were laid and that a new worldview gradually emerged. Gardens played a key role, perfectly embodying the new *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. The new garden style appeared in Italy between the 15th and the 16th century, displaying very distinctive traits, but also a variety of solutions that reflected the specific context of the different regions of Italy, that at the time were independent countries. The Barbarigo Garden is located in the Veneto region, in north-eastern Italy, a land that during the Renaissance was part of the Republic of Venice. Here, Renaissance gardens took the form of private gardens of the so-called “Venetian villas,” a typology of countryside residence for the aristocrats of the lagoon capital, that were both agricultural enterprises and, at the same time, places for holidays.

In this section, the general traits of the Renaissance will be outlined, then Italian Renaissance Gardens will be described, and finally there will be a focus on Venetian villas.

4.2.1 The Renaissance

The Renaissance was a process of cultural renovation, inspired by the rediscovery and the recognition of the value of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. It started in Florence, Italy, around the 1420s, even though examples of humanist literature and philosophy had already appeared during the previous century.

This period was characterized by a strong economic expansion, with the rise of trade and cities, and with an unprecedented social mobility. The bourgeoisie became more and more rich and powerful, and needed to display its centrality with a new artistic style, that had to be clearly different from the late Gothic, which was strongly associated with the feudal aristocracy that ruled during the Middle Ages. The new economic system, based on markets and competition, brought about new values in society: innovation, novelty, and individualism. In order to sell his works, every craftsman had to develop his own peculiar style, different

from everyone else's: this way, he stopped being a craftsman and became an artist or an architect. These jobs thus started to be seen as "intellectual" activities and to play a key role in society.

Along with individualism, another idea was established: that Humankind is the center of the Universe, and that, as Greek philosopher Protagoras (c. 490-420 BCE) had claimed, "man is the measure of all things" (Duignan, n.d.). Time, space and reality started to be considered from the point of view of the individual human being rather than from that of God. Dogmatism yielded to curiosity: a curiosity that was first expressed through art, which became a crucial tool for getting to know the world, and later through science. The invention of linear perspective allowed artists to represent measurable, geometrical spaces: thanks to this mathematical tool that mediated between human and cosmic scale, the finite human mind could grasp infinity. The art of the Renaissance was a realistic one, interested in imitating Nature and its underlying mathematical laws, that were considered a reflection of the divine order. As these laws were thought to have been understood by the Ancients, Renaissance artists and architects decided to take inspiration from the masterpieces of their Greek and Roman counterparts, with their proportional system and peculiar decorations.

As Renaissance art developed further, it started to be less an imitation of Nature and more an imitation of itself. The artist's aim was no longer to understand Nature (that task was now performed by Science), but to know himself. The harmony between Humankind and Nature that characterized the first phase of the Renaissance (even though marked since the beginning by a strong anthropocentric connotation), gradually yielded to a deeper separation and polarization of the concepts of Art and Nature. The main source of meaning was now the individual who, through observation and scientific experimentation, was starting to think of himself as the master and dominator of Nature.

4.2.2 Italian Renaissance gardens

Gardens played a crucial role in Renaissance culture: they were powerful metaphors and symbols, places for philosophical contemplation, and sites for agricultural production. It was precisely during this time that gardening started to be seen as a liberal art rather than a mechanical one, and that gardens started to be considered works of art (Samson, 2011, pp. 2-5).

One of the factors that contributed to giving rise to the flourishing of garden culture during the Renaissance was the growth of population that Europe experienced in those centuries: its consequence was an increase in food prices which, together with low rents and labor costs, laid the foundations for a massive development of commercial farming.

Land owners often took the matter in their own hands, moving to the countryside in order to take closer control of how their properties were managed. After centuries during which they had no direct experience of farming, they sought the information they needed in the classical texts of the Antiquity, such as the *Oeconomicus*, a treatise about household management and agriculture written by Greek historian Xenophon (c. 430-354 BCE; Samson, 2011, p. 2).

Renaissance gardens, however, were not only places for agricultural production: they were also ideal settings for the *otium* of their owners, i.e. their leisure time, dedicated to intellectually or morally valuable activities. There was, for example, a tradition of “literary and philosophical groups gathering in gardens in the proximity of murmuring springs and fountains” (Cellauro, 2003, p. 54). In fact, the garden was seen as a place for contemplation and poetry, as these activities are inspired by Nature.

A complex relationship between Humankind and Nature was displayed in Renaissance gardens. Italian art historian Claudia Lazzaro (b. 1947) summarized its main traits:

The Renaissance universe is hierarchical, with God at the summit, human beings in the center, nature below, and each part related to the other. The natural world was perceived in terms of its usefulness for human needs: plants and animals provide food and medicine. They also reflect human traits, virtues, and beliefs, and therefore serve as symbols – heraldic, moral, philosophical, and religious. At the same time, the visible world corresponds with the divinely created cosmos; the microcosm reflects the macrocosm. To know this world is therefore also to know God. (1990, p. 8)

The role of Art was to imitate Nature: not only its external appearance, but also the underlying logic that reflected divine will. Art improved Nature by bringing out its intrinsic order, thus making it more beautiful and perfect. Gardens were considered a symbol of “creative power, the shaping and improvement of nature, a metaphor for humanity’s divine nature and ability to impose spirit and reason on matter, disorder and chaos” (Samson, 2011, p. 14).

This underlying order of Nature, that gardens made visible, consisted in geometry and mathematics. Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who is considered the father of the scientific method, wrote that “this grand book, the universe, . . . is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it . . .” (Galilei, 1957, pp. 237-238). Mathematics could in fact be found in the geometrical patterns of the paths and hedges of Renaissance gardens, as well as in their perspectives, symmetries, optical illusions, acoustical effects, sundials, fountains, automata and other

complex devices. In the 18th century, French architect Jacques-François Blondel went as far as defining gardening a *science* (Remmert, 2016, p. 14).

During the Renaissance, both scientists and garden designers became convinced that humans had dominion over Nature, that they could control it, and that this power would increase as Science progressed. Gardens were considered the highest form of Nature: they were the “third nature,” superior to farmland, or “second nature,” and to wild nature, or “first nature.” In the Renaissance garden, Nature was replicated in an ordered, controlled way: topiary¹ gave a geometrical shape to plants, while fountains and hydraulic devices regulated the flow of water. It was a “celebration of the superiority of human creation and art over the natural world” (Hunt, 2000, p. 85). Renaissance gardens were places where “man challenges God in his ambition to modify and regulate nature”, trying to recreate Eden, the mythical garden from which God expelled Humankind (Carpi, 2012, p. 33).

By reproducing Nature, the garden revealed the cosmic order that underlies appearances, allowing visitors to acquire knowledge of the divine. It reflected the Renaissance belief of a correspondence between what is visible and what is invisible, creating a microcosm that contained the same harmony of the macrocosm – a harmony that was expressed through proportions, perspective, and symmetry, but also clear hierarchies. The microcosm of the garden, in fact, was clearly put under the control of Humankind, the highest and most perfect creation of God.

4.2.3 Venetian villas

After a long period of great political and military power and economic expansion, during the 16th century Venice was forced to face a series of problems. The new geographical discoveries put an end to the monopoly that the lagoon city held on trade with India and the East. The gold that arrived in Spain and Portugal from America caused a huge inflation that led to the bankruptcy of two important Venetian banks. The galleys of the Venetian fleet, that had been the pride of the city and had granted it dominion over the Mediterranean, were now obsolete if compared with the lighter and faster English ships. And, with the rise of nation states in Europe, a city-state like Venice could no longer be a key player in the political arena. In order to stop this apparently inevitable decline, Venetian aristocrats decided to invest their great wealth, accumulated in centuries of trade, in more stable and less risky enterprises, so they acquired extensive agricultural properties in the mainland (Ackerman, 1966/1972, pp. 24-25).

Venetian villas were a synthesis of functionality and beauty. They were composed of

1 Topiary is a horticultural practice that consists in training perennial plants to develop and maintain a clearly defined shape.

a main residential building, other structures dedicated to productive functions, a formal garden and agricultural fields. As explained by Venetian humanist Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550), “nature is productive, pleasure and utility combined, garden, villa and farm interrelated, nature cultivated and improved” (as cited in Samson, 2011, p. 10).

The value of a sober life, dedicated to agriculture, was celebrated by Venetian nobleman Alvise Cornaro (1464/1467-1566). For him, the ideal was to be a *homo faber*, a “man who makes” and who manages to dominate Nature through hard work (Rugolo, 1994, p. 151). The productive aspect, however, was not everything there was to a villa. Many Venetian aristocrats were cultured humanists who enjoyed art, literature and philosophy. Some of them were even interested in alchemy, an ancient form of speculative thought that aimed at understanding the relationship of Humankind to the cosmos. Alchemical symbolisms can be found, for example, in many Venetian paintings from the Renaissance, such as those painted by Giorgione (1477/1478-1510), but also in the writings of the above-mentioned Alvise Cornaro, who claimed that “agriculture . . . is the true alchemy” (Rugolo, 1994, p. 152). It is not surprising, therefore, that the gardens of Venetian villas often display rich symbolisms related to philosophy, religion, or alchemy.

As time passed and the decline of the Venetian Republic intensified, the agricultural role of the villas faded, and their gardens became places purely dedicated to aesthetic enjoyment and contemplation. The Barbarigo Garden is a perfect example of this phenomenon: in it, artistic research and attention for the details reached a climax. Its hydraulic system of fountains, ponds, basins and jets is extremely sophisticated, as are the garden’s symbolic meanings. At this point, the garden was no longer an extension of the villa, but an autonomous work of art that reduced the residential building to a mere pretext for such elaborate masterpiece (Scarpari, 1980, pp. 201-203).

4.3 HISTORY

The documented history of the Barbarigo Garden began around the mid-fifteenth century, when Giacomo Scrovegni¹ sold a land in Valsanzibio to the Venetian nobleman Ludovico Contarini² (Istituto Regionale Ville Venete, n.d., p. 232). During the 16th century, there was already a garden, which was described in a letter written by humanist and astronomer Ales-

1 The Scrovegni were a noble family from Padua, a city located in Veneto, about 15 km north of Valsanzibio. They are known for having built the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, where Giotto painted, at the beginning of the 14th century, a fresco cycle that is considered one of the most important masterpieces in the history of European art.

2 The Contarini were one of the founding families of Venice, and one of the most ancient and noble. They held the most seats in the Great Council of Venice. From them came 8 Doges of the Republic of Venice, 44 Procurators of Saint Mark, several ambassadors, diplomats and other notables.

sandro Piccolomini (1508-1578) in 1539 as a *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place (Istituto Regionale Ville Venete, n.d., p. 232). A map of the Contarini estates that dates to 1570 depicts a fortified court, surrounded by swamps and meadows (Puppi, 1983, p. 286).

In 1588, ownership of the land passed to Piero Michiel¹ and Nicolò Ferro. Then, in 1619, it was inherited by the Venetian nobleman Giovanni Francesco Barbarigo,² who started right away the realization of a new garden, completing before 1623 the east-west axis (Istituto Regionale Ville Venete, n.d., p. 232). In 1631, a plague outbreak raged in Venice, as well as in the rest of Italy, killing Lucrezia Lion, the wife of Giovanni Francesco. To escape the epidemic, the Barbarigo took refuge in their land in Valsanzibio, and Giovanni Francesco made a solemn vow that if the rest of the family survived, he would realize a masterpiece that would glorify the might of God (Tenuta Valsanzibio, n.d.).

In the following decades, his two sons, Gregorio and Antonio, kept their father's promise and created the Barbarigo Garden. Gregorio (1625-1697) was a Catholic cardinal, and served as Bishop of Bergamo and, then, of Padua. He is venerated as a Saint because of the piety and patience he displayed during his life and because of the miracles he supposedly performed. Antonio (d. 1702), on the other hand, held several important political roles in the Republic of Venice: he was Senator,³ Mayor Inquisitor of the Mainland⁴, *Podestà*⁵ of Brescia, Sage Executor of the Magistrate for the Waters⁶ and Procurator of Saint Mark.⁷ It is not clear, however, which one of the two brothers was the main commissioner of the garden, with some sources claiming that Antonio "can be identified as the leading figure in the re-planning of the property" (Puppi, 1983, p. 289) and other ones highlighting the fact that the deep and complex symbolism of the Barbarigo Garden must have been inspired by Gregorio, a cultured man and devout Christian (Tenuta Valsanzibio, n.d.). In any case, the north-south axis was built between 1664 and 1665 (Istituto Regionale Ville Venete, n.d., p. 232). Then, from 1678, statues and decorations started to be added, and trees, shrubs and flowers started to be planted. The works went on until 1702, when the death of Antonio probably

1 The Michiel were a noble Venetian family. From them came three Doges of the Republic of Venice.

2 The Barbarigo were a noble Venetian family, originated from the Istrian area. From them came two Doges of the Republic of Venice. Other prominent members of this family include Agostino (1518-1571), who was one of the commanders of the Holy League fleet during the Battle of Lepanto (1571), and Gregorio (1625-1697), a Cardinal and Saint who was one of the commissioners of the Barbarigo Garden at Valsanzibio.

3 The Venetian Senate was the main deliberative and legislative organ of the Republic of Venice. It was formed by about 300 men, of which about 230 had a right to vote.

4 In the Republic of Venice, Mayor Inquisitors of the Mainland were in charge of inspecting the mainland domains of the Republic, at first only with a judiciary function, and later obtaining more and more powers.

5 A *Podestà* was a local administrator of a city.

6 The Magistrate for the Waters was a magistracy responsible for water management in the Venetian Lagoon.

7 The office of Procurator of Saint Mark was one of the most prestigious in the Republic of Venice. The Procurators were in charge of the administration of Saint Mark's Basilica, the protection of orphans and insane people and the execution of wills.

caused a temporary suspension. After that, the ambitious original plan was executed only in part, with the labyrinth being completed in the following years, but with other elements, such as a theatre, pavilions and an enclosure for animals, remaining unbuilt (Puppi, 1983, pp. 283-290).

Even though the original project was not completely carried out, the result is still one of the most beautiful and complex Renaissance Garden in Veneto. Its realization was possible thanks to the interaction of several actors, each with a specific role. Gregorio Barbarigo, who had studied Greek, mathematics, history and philosophy at the University of Padua and who, being a Cardinal, had a deep knowledge of the Bible, was probably the one who laid out the symbolic program of the garden. Luigi Bernini (1612-1681), an architect, engineer and fountain expert who worked for the Vatican, and who was the brother of the famous Gian Lorenzo Bernini, was the one who designed the Barbarigo Garden and its sophisticated hydraulic system. Heinrich Meyring (1628-1723), a German sculptor, was in charge of the statues. Finally, several local craftsmen, from Valsanzibio and Monselice, realized the masonries, stoneworks, ironworks, woodworks and other decorations (Istituto Regionale Ville Venete, n.d., p. 232).

In 1804, the Barbarigo family became extinct, and the garden was inherited by Marco Antonio Michiel. During the 19th and 20th century, ownership of the Valsanzibio property passed to the counts Martinengo da Barco,¹ then to the counts Donà delle Rose² and finally, in 1929, to the noble family Pizzoni Ardemani, the current owners, who opened the garden to the public. Today, the Barbarigo Garden is a tourist attraction and has even won some awards: in 2003 the first prize for “most beautiful garden in Italy” and in 2007 the third prize for “most beautiful garden in Europe” (Tenuta Barbarigo, n.d.).

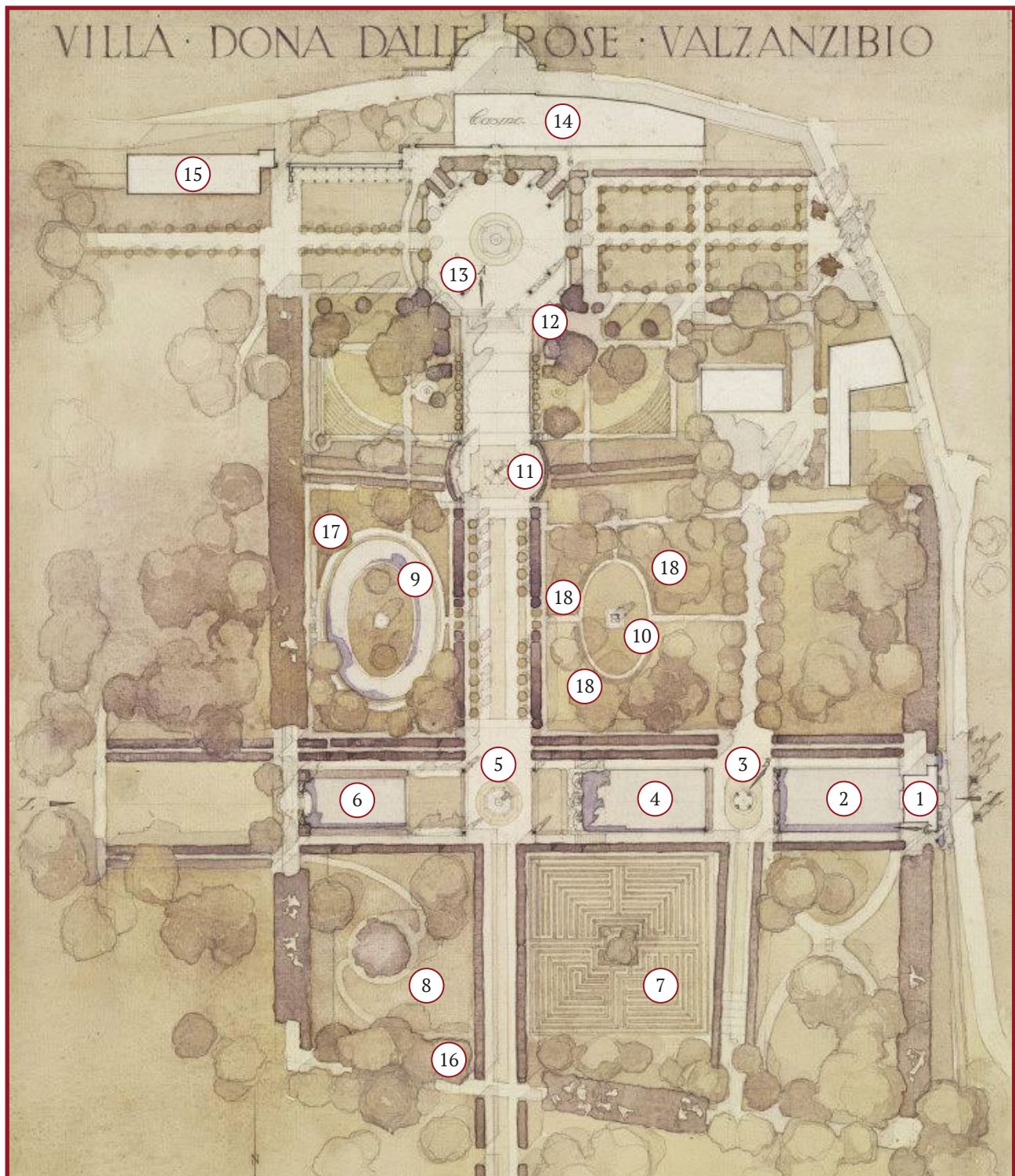
4.4 DESCRIPTION

As in the description of the Master of Nets Garden in section 2.4, also in this case two approaches will be adopted: firstly, the plan of the Barbarigo Garden will be studied, and then the symbolic path that the visitor had to follow will be analyzed.

There are, however, some crucial differences between the two gardens. Firstly, in a Renaissance garden the planimetry has a much greater importance, as it is the main means through which space is thought and planned by the designer, and as it carries deep symbolic meanings. Furthermore, in the Barbarigo Garden the visitor is not free to choose the route

¹ The Martinengo were a noble family from Brescia, a city that is located in the Lombardy region and that, from the 15th to the 18th century, was ruled by the Venetian Republic.

² The Donà were a Venetian noble family. From them came three Doges of the Republic of Venice.



■ Fig. 4.4.a Plan of the Barbarigo Garden.

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. Diana's Pavilion | 10. Statue of Time |
| 2. Fish Pond of the Rivers | 11. Fountain of Water Tricks |
| 3. Rainbow Fountain | 12. Staircase of the Sonnet |
| 4. Fish Pond of the Winds | 13. Square of Revelations and Fountain of Ecstasy |
| 5. Pila Fountain | 14. Villa |
| 6. Red Fish Pond | 15. Citrus Greenhouse |
| 7. Labyrinth | 16. Plane tree |
| 8. Hermit's Grotto | 17. Cedar |
| 9. Rabbit Island | 18. Yews |

he prefers: there is only one “right” path that will lead him to divine salvation. Lastly, the geometric layout of the garden allows the visitor to understand and dominate space, making him always aware of his position in the general scheme of the place.

4.4.1 Plan

The Barbarigo Garden covers an area of around 10 hectares, surrounded by the beautiful landscape of the Euganean Hills. Its rectangular plan is made up of geometrical modules, multiples and submultiples of a certain surface unit. There are two main axes, the *cardo* (north-south) and the *decumanus* (east-west), that intersect exactly at the center, where the Pila Fountain is placed. The quartering of space recalls the typical plan of Ancient Roman towns, where two main roads, that were called *cardo* and *decumanus* and were aligned with the cardinal points, divided the city in four parts, both for practical reasons and for achieving cosmological harmony. On the same principle was also based the plan of medieval monastery gardens and cloisters: they were divided into four quadrants with a fountain in the middle, thus reflecting the structure of the universe and representing the four rivers,¹ the four seasons, the four elements, the four humors,² the four cardinal virtues,³ and the four Gospels.

The main entrance of the garden is Diana’s Pavilion, located on its eastern side. During the 17th and 18th century, it was accessible via water, thanks to a network of canals and rivers that connected it directly to the Lagoon of Venice. This monumental entranceway served to display the power and wealth of the Barbarigo family.

On the *decumanus*, the east-west axis, a series of ponds and fountains can be found: the Fish Pond of the Rivers, the Rainbow Fountain, the Fish Pond of the Winds, the Pila Fountain, and the Red Fish Pond (this last one was added by the Martinengo da Barco family in the 19th century). The *cardo*, the north-south axis, instead, is the main boulevard of the garden. At its northern end, there are the Fountain of Water Tricks and the Staircase of the Sonnet, that gives access to the Square of Revelations, where the Fountain of Ecstasy and the residential building of the villa are located. Near it, there are some minor buildings, such as stables, an oratory, and, to the west, the Citrus Greenhouse.

The *cardo* and the *decumanus* create, in the central part of the garden, four squares of

1 The “four rivers” are the ones mentioned in the Genesis, the first book of the Bible, as being the rivers that flow in the Eden Garden. They have been identified as the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile and the Ganges.

2 The “four humors” were the concept at the base of the medicine system of the Greek and Roman civilizations. According to Greek physician Hippocrates, who is considered the “father of medicine”, there are in the human body four vital fluids that have to stay balanced in order to grant health. They are: blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile.

3 The “four cardinal virtues” were first identified by Greek philosopher Plato (428/427 or 424/423 - 348/347 BCE) and then became part of Christian theology. They are: Prudence, Courage, Temperance and Justice.



Fig. 4.4.b Diana's Pavilion, the main entrance to the Barbarigo Garden.



Fig. 4.4.c The facade of Diana's Pavilion, with its mascarons, low reliefs and statues.



Fig. 4.4.d The Fish Pond of the Rivers, the beginning of the symbolical purification of the visitor.



Fig. 4.4.e The Fish Pond of the Winds, symbol of fresh air.



Fig. 4.4.f The Fountain of Water Tricks, in the *cardo*.



Fig. 4.4.g The Staircase of the Sonnet, with a poem written on its steps.

equal dimensions. Each of them contains a landmark that is also an important allegorical element: to the south-east, the Labyrinth; to the south-west, the Hermit's Grotto; to the north-west, the Rabbit Island; to the north-east, the Statue of Time. These four elements constitute key steps in the Salvation Path.

4.4.2 Salvation Path

The Barbarigo Garden represents a quest for finding God, for moving from darkness and ignorance towards the light of truth and revelation. By following the symbolical itinerary thought by the creators of the garden, the visitor can approach divine Salvation:

The garden is designed around an allegorical journey, conveying to visitors the positive message of a life where difficulties are faced and where there is always a solution: a life where, every now and then, it is good to stop and meditate; a life where time is precious and must be lived intensely, with joy, waiting for eternity. (Tenuta Valsanzibio, n.d.)

The symbolical path of the Barbarigo Garden was inspired by the Neoplatonism of Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose thought, that tried to reconcile Christian doctrine with the classical ideals of the Greeks and the Romans, was very influential during Renaissance (Petti, 2017). According to Ficino, the sensible world is a mere reflection of the metaphysical intelligible world, therefore “the soul must do everything it can to transcend the physical body and live a life worthy of the blessed angels” (Moore, n.d.).

The Salvation journey begins at the main entrance of the garden, that is Diana's Pavilion (fig. 4.4.b). The building is decorated with mascarons, low reliefs and statues made of Istrian stone (fig. 4.4.c). On top of it, there is a sculpture that depicts Diana, the Roman goddess of Nature, both as wilderness and as “tamed” countryside. She was also associated with the moon and was considered the patroness of hunters and protector of childbirth.

After entering the garden, the visitor finds himself in the *decumanus* and encounters the Fish Pond of the Rivers (fig. 4.4.d), decorated with two statues that represent the personifications of the two main rivers of the area: the Bacchiglione and the Brenta. This place symbolizes the beginning of purification: the visitor leaves behind the stagnant water of the swamps and washes his soul with the pure, clean water of the rivers.

After being purified with water, the visitor is cleansed once again by the fresh air symbolized by the Fish Pond of the Winds (fig. 4.4.e). Then, he arrives at the Pila Fountain, the center of the garden. At this point the visitor could just turn right and reach the villa.

But he first needs to complete his purification journey, so he must turn left and enter the Labyrinth. By a process of trial and error, the visitor recognizes his sins, repents, finds the

correct route and finally reaches the tower in the middle and understands his role in the world.

The next stage is represented by the Hermit's Grotto, where one can meditate on the things he has learned in the Labyrinth. Then, the visitor can return to the Pila Fountain and proceed forward. While approaching the villa, one sees the Rabbit Island on the left and the Statue of Time on the right. The former represents the immanence of the human body, a prison in which the soul is confined. The latter, on the other hand, symbolizes the transcendence of the soul that, being immortal, goes beyond the limits imposed by the body.

The visitor then thinks that he has arrived at the end of the path and sits on the benches positioned near the Fountain of Water Tricks (fig. 4.4.f). However, a series of water jets makes him wet, revealing his mistake: Salvation is not yet achieved. In fact, one has to climb the Staircase of the Sonnet (fig. 4.4.g). It is made of seven steps, each of whom contains two verses of a poetry:

O curious voyager, you who in this site
Come and think to admire an uncommon sight,
Anything that here looks beautiful and fine,
Has been realized by Nature, it's not Art's sign.
Here the Sun dispenses his shimmering rays,
Venus from the sea here great beauty displays,
The Moon here reveals a brighter appearance,
Here Mars's fury can't cause interference,
Saturn his own offspring here doesn't ingest,
Here Jupiter shows favor in a calm vest,
Hither Mercury loses all deception,
Here there is no place for Tears, this is Laugh's yard.
The thunderbolts from the Court here can't be heard,¹
Over there is Hell, and right here is Heaven.²

This poem, composed by an unknown author, stresses the fact that the Barbarigo Garden is a place of peace and tranquility, far away from the problems of Venice: it is a reproduction of the Garden of Eden, the Lost Paradise. Every element in the Salvation Path, whose conclusion is the Square of Revelations, right in front of the villa, helps the visitor to purify himself, getting as near as possible to God: "everything unites to create and define an extra dimension, that of a paradise, beyond and indeed above the snares of fate and death" (Puppi, 1983, p. 296).

Humans, however, are mortal beings, and their finite mind will never be able to under-

1 This verse means that Valsanzibio is a quiet place, where the problems ("thunderbolts") of Venice ("the Court") are not important ("can't be heard"). This idea is reinforced in the following verse.

2 The poem has been translated into English by the author of this thesis.

stand an infinite, eternal God. Even the Barbarigo Garden cannot completely explain the divine mysteries, as it is limited in terms of time and space. Humans can get near to God only up to a certain point: beyond that, they can only catch a glimpse of his real essence. And, in the same way, beyond the villa and the end of the Salvation Path, the visitor can see two rows of cypresses that lead his gaze outside the boundaries of the property, towards Mount Gallo and towards an unthinkable infinity.

4.5 ELEMENTS, SPACE AND MOVEMENT

The elements that make up an Italian Renaissance garden are not very different from those of the Chinese tradition: rocks (that can be shaped as sculptures or grottoes), water, plants and buildings. What changes, though, is their proportions, hierarchy, shape and role. For example, in Renaissance gardens there are usually less architectures, but it is often the case that the villa building is the main focus of the composition. On the other hand, plants cover a much larger surface than in Chinese gardens, while sculptures only play a decorative role and do not have the cosmological significance accorded to them in the Eastern tradition. In both cases, however, there is a complex balance between the different elements, where each of them plays a precise role and every little detail has a precise meaning:

In Valsanzibio nothing has been designed randomly. . . . Nothing has been contrived as a mere garnish. . . . Here one can experience entering right away in an ecstatic vision, that is being captured by a calm openness towards meanings that transcend the signs through which they show themselves. A symbol is always a sign that reminds of a deeper meaning . . . (Osto, 2016, p. 8)

Also in the conception of space and movement we can find both similarities and differences. In fact, the importance of establishing a relationship with the surroundings and the variety of multisensorial perceptions are key elements in both Italian and Chinese gardens. The dominance of geometry and perspective, instead, is a peculiarity of the Western tradition.

In the next paragraphs, the main principles that lie behind the composition of the Barbarigo Garden will be clarified.

4.5.1 Water

Water is the “*leitmotiv* of the symbolic discourse” (Puppi, 1983, p. 292) of the Barbarigo Garden, representing life, purification and regeneration:

flowing from perpetual springs, it enriches the earth and, like veins in the human



■ Fig. 4.5.a Static water: the Red Fish Pond, located at the end of the *decumanus*.



■ Fig. 4.5.b Dynamic water: the Rainbow Fountain.



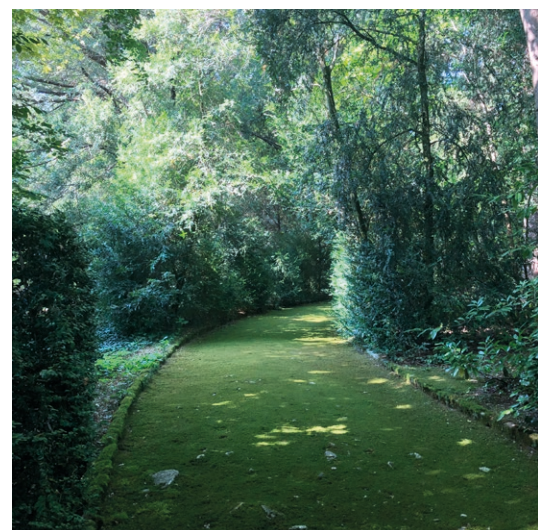
■ Fig. 4.5.c Dynamic water: water jets near the Fountain of the Water Tricks.



■ Fig. 4.5.d Plants: boxwood hedges cut with geometrical patterns.



■ Fig. 4.5.e Plants: white flowers at the border of a large lawn.



■ Fig. 4.5.f Plants: a path covered with moss.

body, irrigates and nourishes it, and divides into branches, pouring down from the highest mountains or issuing from their roots or spreading through broad fields. (Fagiolo, 1981, p. 198)

Water is also an important symbol of metamorphosis, change and transformation, so it constitutes the perfect element for accompanying the visitor in his journey towards Salvation. In Italian Renaissance gardens, it can be used both as a static and a dynamic element.

In the first case, it takes the shape of a pond, usually with a geometrical configuration (a rectangle, a square, a circle, an ellipse, etc.). It can be filled with fish or with water lilies; and, sometimes, there is an island in it. The presence of vegetation, however, is not particularly common, as it would deprive the water of its reflecting properties. Reflections, in fact, are very important, as they contribute to creating a magical atmosphere, reproducing the beauty of the other elements of the garden (sculptures, architectures, etc.) and of the Universe itself. Dynamic water, on the other hand, is an expression of joy and a powerful symbol of metamorphosis. It can take a variety of shapes: fountains, nymphaeums, waterfalls, springs and water jets.

Examples of static water in the Barbarigo Garden are the Fish Pond of the Rivers, the Fish Pond of the Winds, the Red Fish Pond (fig. 4.5.a), and the Rabbit Island. Dynamic water, instead, can be found in the Rainbow Fountain (fig. 4.5.b), the Pila Fountain, the Fountain of Water Tricks, the water tricks themselves (fig. 4.5.c), and the Ecstasy Fountain.

4.5.2 Plants

Plants are the dominant element in terms of quantity in Italian Renaissance gardens. In the Barbarigo Garden there are over 800 trees, belonging to more than 100 different species. Several of them are old specimens, dating back to the 17th century, therefore being part of the original project by Luigi Bernini. There are even more ancient trees, planted 600 or even 900 years ago (Tenuta Valsanzibio, n.d.). They are mostly evergreen trees and shrubs, such as cypress, yew, boxwood, cedar. These species have been chosen because they keep the same appearance throughout the year, independently of season and weather. Besides, most of them have minute foliage, so they can be shaped with geometrical patterns. Differently than Chinese garden, where plants should have a “natural”, spontaneous, irregular shape, in Italian gardens “artificial” regularity is preferred (fig. 4.5.d).

Other plants that can be found in Italian Renaissance gardens include water plants, vines and creepers: these are often used to decorate ponds, nymphaeums and grottoes. Multi-sensorial stimulations are given by colorful flowers (fig. 4.5.e) and scented citruses (such as lemons or oranges), usually potted and placed at regular intervals on balustrades or along

boulevards and paths.

Variety was highly encouraged, and species from all over the world were planted in Renaissance gardens. When they were creating their garden, in the 17th century, the Barbarigo bought thirty unknown plants that came from the newly discovered Americas. Even though they did not even know if they would have survived the climate and conditions of northern Italy, they still took them because it was a sign of wealth and prestige to possess plants from the “new world.” This is very different from Chinese classical gardens, where only plants that had a long-established role and meaning in the tradition were accepted. Furthermore, during the Renaissance there was another reason for planting exotic species: at that time, gardens were considered a reproduction of the Universe, and therefore had to contain all the variety that could be found in the world, like a sort of encyclopedia:

The garden was indeed a summation of contemporary knowledge of the natural world, a microcosm of nature in the literal sense. . . . In the second quarter of the fifteenth century the humanist, mathematician, and architect Leon Battista Alberti declared that in a garden should be planted “every fine fruit that exists in any country.” . . . The encyclopedic planting of the garden was motivated by the . . . desire to collect and catalogue all existing specimens that characterized the flourishing activity of Renaissance naturalists. (Lazzaro, 1990, pp. 10-11)

4.5.3 Grottoes and sculptures

In Italian Renaissance gardens, rocks can play two very different roles: they can be grottoes or sculptures. Both elements had deep symbolical meanings, related to mythology or alchemy, but they had different aesthetic purposes: the former tended to have a “natural” appearance, while the latter clearly displayed the work of humans.

Sculptures, in particular, were an essential element of the garden. They often depicted characters and events from Greek and Roman mythology. Statues were not only a decorative element, but they also directed the gaze of the visitor and articulated architectural space: they were strategically placed, for example, in the middle of a *parterre*,¹ at the end of an axis, at an entrance, at regular intervals along walls or hedges.

Grottoes and sculptures often had a strong relationship with water. The former, in fact, sometimes contained waterfalls or water jets, while the latter were used to decorate fountains and ponds. Statues could also establish a symbolical connection with water, representing deities or animals related to this element, or depicting personifications of specific rivers, as is the case with the sculptures that decorate the Fish Pond of the Rivers in the Barbarigo Garden (figs. 4.5.g-h):

1 In Renaissance gardens, a *parterre* is a flat area with a formal arrangement of plants or flowers.

Renaissance artists invented new river god types for local rivers, which allowed them to signify not just aspects of nature – gendered, animate, abundant – but also particular places and together with other personifications of nature, a region in microcosm. They could confer legitimacy on a prince or demonstrate the effects of his good rule (in natural abundance, flood control, aqueduct construction, and so on) in triumphal entries, garden fountains, and much more. (Lazzaro, 2011, p. 94)

In the Barbarigo Garden, we can find one example of grotto, the Hermit's Grotto, and several sculptures. Both elements play a key role in the symbolism of the Salvation Path, and on the basement of each statue can be found a cryptic inscription that guides the visitor in his interpretation of the meaning of the garden.

4.5.4 Buildings

As already mentioned, the presence of buildings in Italian Renaissance gardens is not as preponderant as in Chinese classical gardens. Still, architectures often play a key role. In the Barbarigo Garden, for example, it is two buildings that mark the beginning and the end of the Salvation Path: Diana's Pavilion and the villa (fig. 4.5.i). Other small structures, such as the tower at the center of the labyrinth and the hexagonal aviary in the Rabbit Island, complete the picture, while minor buildings such as stables, an oratory, and the Citrus Greenhouse, are located in a more secluded position (fig. 4.5.j).

The villa has a rectangular plan and is three floors high. On each level, the same basic scheme, typical of Venetian architecture, is repeated: a large hall in the middle that gives access to smaller rooms on the two sides. In the central portion of the main façade, two triforas let abundant air and light enter the main halls, while smaller windows on the sides illuminate the other rooms. The top of the façade is marked by a tympanum decorated with acroterions.

4.5.5 Axes, geometry and perspective

In an Italian Renaissance garden, space is organized around main and secondary axes, whose ends are usually marked by important elements, such as the main entrance, a pond or the villa. As explained in paragraph 4.4.1, the Barbarigo Garden is based on two orthogonal axes, the *cardo* (fig. 4.5.k) and the *decumanus*. Along them, one finds a sequence of "rooms" (Parolin, 2003, p. 5), that consist in clearly defined spaces with a specific formal arrangement and symbolic meaning: in this case, some examples are the Labyrinth, the Hermit's Grotto, the Rabbit Island and the Statue of Time. This configuration allows the visitor to clearly understand the space and to easily orientate himself. The space is geometrical, measurable, controllable.



■ **Fig. 4.5.g** Statue of the Bacchiglione River, in the Fish Ponds of the Rivers.



■ **Fig. 4.5.h** Statue of the Brenta River, in the Fish Pond of the Rivers.



■ **Fig. 4.5.i** Facade of the villa, with the typical scheme of Venetian architecture.



■ **Fig. 4.5.j** A minor building in the garden.



■ **Fig. 4.5.k** View of the *cardo* from the Staircase of the Sonnet.



■ **Fig. 4.5.l** The axis of the *cardo* is extended indefinitely by the rows of cypresses on Mount Gallo.

The design of Italian Renaissance gardens is based on mathematics: “the landscaping mathematics suggests divine reason and talks about a Heaven created by a mathematical God (*Deus geometer*)” (Mexi, 2016, p. 248). The geometric layout of these gardens may have also been inspired by the grid on which was burned Saint Lawrence (Mexi, 2016, p. 251).

One of the main expressions of geometry in the garden is the massive use of perspective. Its invention, in the 15th century, represented a turning point: since then, argues Italian geographer Franco Farinelli (b. 1948), “one of the five senses, the eye, becomes autonomous” (Farinelli, 2007, p. 32). This concept can be better understood with an example: if one stands in the middle of the *cardo* in the Barbarigo Garden, looking towards the villa, he realizes that, while his eyes suggest that the parallel lines of the boulevard converge towards the vanishing point, the other four senses tell that this is impossible, that parallel lines never meet (Farinelli, 2007, pp. 33-34).

Geometry, however, was not the only branch of mathematics on which garden design was based. Hydraulics and engineering, for example, were just as important:

Garden design was determined by the aim of displaying variety within an ordered structure, but was also directly related to the ability to manipulate nature. (Lazzaro, 1990, p. 16)

A mechanistic worldview was infiltrating all the fields of knowledge and art, among which there was of course garden design. Besides, as gardens were a representation of the absolute power of princes, kings and aristocrats, through mathematics they could also demonstrate that the garden owner could control Nature itself.

During Renaissance the natural world was mostly viewed as something that could be understood and subdued by humans. But this was not all there was to it: there was also the idea of Nature as something mysterious and unpredictable. As Claudia Lazzaro explains,

. . . another aspect of nature was acknowledged and expressed in Renaissance gardens as well – the wild, fearful, uncontrollable, and unknowable. . . . This untamed nature, both frightening and marvelous, was represented allegorically and sometimes actually in the garden, an essential complement to the comprehensible and ordered in nature. (Lazzaro, 1990, pp. 18-19)

In the Barbarigo Garden, in fact, both the *decumanus* and the *cardo*, in different ways, lose their measurability and controllability, allowing the visitor to grasp infinity. The former is made of a series of water elements (fountains and ponds), so that the mist that rises from these liquid masses hides the vanishing point at the end of the boulevard, making it look endless. The latter, on the other hand, finds its continuation beyond the villa, with the rows

of cypresses located on Mount Gallo, that extend this axis indefinitely in the surrounding landscape (fig. 4.5.1).

4.5.6 Integration with the landscape

The rows of cypresses that have been just mentioned are also the main sign of the integration between the Barbarigo Garden and the surrounding Euganean Hills. This was, in fact, one of the main features of Italian Renaissance gardens, and especially of Venetian villas. The axes of the garden were designed taking into account the scenes that could be seen at their ends, so that the perspective of the boulevards would guide the gaze of the visitor towards a beautiful view. This design strategy, however, did not have only an aesthetic purpose, but it also allowed the owner of the property to control all his agricultural fields directly from the windows of his villa. In Renaissance gardens, the landscape is not “borrowed” like in Chinese classical gardens, but it is instead dominated: the inferior “second nature” is controlled by the superior “third nature.”

4.5.7 Multisensoriality

As discussed in paragraph 4.5.5, the Renaissance was characterized by a dominance of sight over the other four senses. This does not mean, however, that acoustic, olfactory and tactile perceptions were absent from gardens. The scent of flowers, citruses and odoriferous herbs pervaded the space of Italian Renaissance gardens. Animals such as hares, rabbits, porcupines, tortoises and birds roamed around the lawns and trees, each producing peculiar sounds. Other elements that contributed to creating a pleasant soundscape were the murmuring, gushing, dripping, falling and rippling of water in fountains, jets, ponds and cascades. Waterworks of every kind were ludic and interactive elements of the garden, intended to amuse the visitor with multisensorial perceptions. According to Leon Battista Alberti, gardens were the only place where one could

recover true human dignity and achieve harmony of the body and the soul. The villa . . . was the sole place where one could find solace and tranquility in raising one’s children and earning income from the land, the most honest and noble pursuit. (Tchikine, 2017, p. 237)

4.6 THE LABYRINTH AND THE ROLE OF BOXWOOD

The analysis will now focus on four sections of the Barbarigo Garden, that are also key elements in the Salvation Path. The first of them is the Labyrinth. Located in the south-east quadrant of the garden, it is a metaphor of one's journey through life, learning from his mistakes and striving to achieve redemption for his own sins. Its walls are made of six thousand boxwood plants, most of which are over four hundred years old. In this section, the significance of boxwood in Italian culture will be explored, and its relationship with the Labyrinth will be discussed.

4.6.1 Boxwood: biology and history

Buxus sempervirens is an evergreen shrub or tree, belonging to the family *Buxaceae*, generally referred to as “box.”¹ It is commonly known as “boxwood” or “common box.” Its native range includes Western Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa.

Boxwood can grow up to 9 meters tall. Its oval leathery leaves are arranged in opposite pairs along the stems, and are 1.5 to 3 centimeters long, and 0.5 to 1.3 centimeters broad. The flowers are green-yellow, with no petals and a strong scent. Boxwood is a hardy plant that can tolerate low temperatures. It usually grows in full sun or partial shade.

Boxwood is one of the first plants to have been cultivated with ornamental purposes: in fact, it was already grown in Egyptian gardens as early as 4,000 BCE.

4.6.2 Boxwood: meaning of the name

Boxwood's Italian name is *bosso*. This word comes from the Latin *buxus*, meaning “boxwood,” which comes from the Greek *πίκος* (πίξος), that indicates boxwood as well. This term is probably related with the Proto-Indo-European root **b^hewg^{h-}*, that means “to bend,” but also “curve, arch.” According to another hypothesis, it is connected to the Proto-Indo-European root **b^huH-*, that means “to become, grow, appear,” from which derive also words like the Greek *phúsis* (φύσις), meaning “nature,” and the Italian *bosco*, meaning “wood, forest.”

4.6.3 Boxwood: symbolism

In Ancient Greece, boxwood was sacred to Cybele, a mother-goddess associated with mountains, nature and wild animals, and to Hades, the god of the dead and king of the underworld. As an evergreen plant, in fact, it symbolized the continuation of life after death

1 The family *Buxaceae* includes around 123 species.



■ **Fig. 4.6.a** Vittore Carpaccio (c. 1465 - 1525/1526), *The Ambassadors Depart*, 1495-1500, 280 x 253 cm, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.



■ **Fig. 4.6.b** Antonello da Messina (c. 1430 - 1479), *Saint Jerome in His Study*, c. 1475, 45.7 x 36.2 cm, National Gallery, London.

■ **Fig. 4.6.c** Antonello da Messina (c. 1430 - 1479), *Annunciation*, 1474, 180 x 180 cm, Bellomo Palace Regional Gallery, Syracuse (Sicily).



■ **Fig. 4.6.d** Unidentified artist, *The Ideal City*, 1470-1490, 67.7 x 239.4 cm, National Gallery of the Marche, Urbino.



and the perpetual rebirth of nature. For this reason, boxwood hedges are often found in cemeteries.

This plant was also associated with the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and fertility. While it may seem surprising that the same plant was a symbol for both death and love, it is actually quite logical, as it is a representation of the whole cycle of life.

As the wood of this plant is especially hard and solid, it is also considered a symbol of steadiness, perseverance and stoicism. In fact, because of these properties, boxwood was widely used for producing writing tablets, boxes (the very word “box” derives from the Latin name of this plant, *buxus*), and even sculptures and carvings.

In the Bible, boxwood is mentioned in the Book of Isaiah:

The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious. (*King James Bible*, 1611, Isa 60:13)

According to this prophecy, boxwood would have been one of the timbers that would have been used to build and decorate the Temple of New Jerusalem, glorifying the might of God. During the Middle Ages, this plant was often used, alongside palms, in the processions for the Palm Sunday, a Christian celebration that remembers the arrival of Jesus at Jerusalem, one week before his death and resurrection. Thus, boxwood started to be also associated with faith in divine Salvation: again, the fact that it is an evergreen plant makes it a perfect symbol of rebirth.

4.6.4 Boxwood: painting

Boxwood has been depicted in several Renaissance paintings, symbolizing different concepts. In Vittore Carpaccio’s (c. 1465 - 1525/1526) *The Ambassadors Depart* (fig. 4.6.a), for example, some garlands made of this plant are represented. Even though the scene is set in the 5th century at the court of the King of Brittany, the painter reproduced the architectures, costumes and uses of contemporary Venice, where boxwood garlands were considered a symbol of the Doge’s power, the supreme authority of the Venetian Republic, and were often used as decorations during ceremonies held in the Doge’s Palace.

Antonello da Messina (c. 1430 - 1479), on the other hand, included small potted box shrubs in his works because of their religious significance. In *Saint Jerome in His Study* (fig. 4.6.b), a painting full of symbolic elements, two potted plants are placed not far from the Saint’s feet. One is a geranium, a reference to the Passion of Jesus; the other is boxwood, a symbol of divine Salvation. In *Annunciation* (fig. 4.6.c), the plant is located in a similar po-

sition, on the floor, near the feet of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In this case, boxwood is depicted as a representation of immortality, alluding to the fact that Mary is already pregnant by virtue of the Holy Spirit.

A different depiction of boxwood can be seen in *The Ideal City* (fig. 4.6.d), painted between 1470 and 1490 by an unknown artist. In this work, that is considered a symbol of the Renaissance, the utopia of an “ideal city” is represented. Even though at first glance there seem to be no vegetation, on a closer inspection one can identify several species on the terraces, window sills and roofs of the buildings: laurel, privet, carnation, ivy, and, of course, boxwood. As an evergreen plant, the latter keeps the same aspect during the whole year, independently of weather and season, so it is the perfect plant for an ideal, abstract, eternal city. This is also the reason why it was widely used in Renaissance gardens, as they were often compared to “ideal cities.”

4.6.5 Boxwood: literature

Boxwood appears in Greek literature mostly as a material for producing hard, long lasting articles. It is only in Roman texts that it starts to be mentioned in poetries as a meaningful element. Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE - 17/18 CE), for example, included this plant in his poems. In *Ars Amatoria* (“The Art of Love”), the poet described a fountain located among the hills of Mount Hymettus, near Athens, and the vegetation that grew around it:

Near where his purple head Hymettus shows,
And flow’ring hills, a sacred fountain flows;
With soft and verdant turf the soil is spread,
And sweetly smelling shrubs the ground o’ershade.
There rosemary and bays their odours join,
And with the fragrant myrtle’s scent combine.
There tamarisks with thick-leav’d box are found,
And cytissus and garden pines abound.
While through the boughs soft winds of Zephyr pass,
Tremble the leaves and tender tops of grass. (1855, book 3)

It is the description of a *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place with trees, grass and water. Since Roman times, boxwood started to be considered a noble plant, that contributed to giving a stately tone to poems. In fact, Eugenio Montale (1896-1981), a modern Italian poet, when in “The Lemon Trees” tries to distance himself from the tradition and from a poetry meant to reveal a metaphysical truth, he uses the boxwood as a symbol of the prestigious language of the past and the humble lemon tree as a stand-in for his own style, focused on everyday life:

Listen to me, laurel-wreathed poets

move only among plants
 with noble names: boxwood acanthus or privets.
 I, for one, love roads that lead to grass covered
 ditches where in partly
 desiccated puddles children
 catch the occasional eel:
 the lanes that coast these banks
 descend through tufts of cane
 and open onto orchards thick with lemons. (1925/2017)

Finally, it is worth noting that, in one of the most important and famous poems in Italian literature, “The Infinite” (“L’Infinito”), by Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), the protagonist is a boxwood hedge, even though the name of the plant is not explicitly mentioned in the verses. Here, the hedge is the element that, by blocking the view of the poet, stimulates his imagination and allows him to think infinity:

Always to me beloved was this lonely hillside
 And the hedgerow creeping over and always hiding
 The distances, the horizon’s furthest reaches.
 But as I sit and gaze, there is an endless
 Space still beyond, there is a more than mortal
 Silence spread out to the last depth of peace,
 Which in my thought I shape until my heart
 Scarcely can hide a fear . . . (1825/1950)

4.6.6 The Labyrinth

In the Salvation Path of the Barbarigo Garden, the Labyrinth symbolizes the journey of life. It is 1,500 meters long, with the paths delimited by 8,000 square meters of boxwood hedges. The visitor proceeds full of doubts, and whenever he finds a crossroads he has to choose the right way. In total, there are thirteen crossroads: nine are three-way junctions, while four of them are four-way. There are six dead ends, representing the deadly sins according to Christian doctrine (Greed, Wrath, Envy, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth), and a vicious circle, that stands for the seventh sin, Pride. When the visitor ends up in one of these cul-de-sacs, he has to humbly go back and admit his mistake. At the end of this path of purification and reflection, the visitor reaches the small tower at the center, and can have a clear view of the labyrinth, understand his mistakes and see his existential path: the labyrinth of Valsanzibio is the labyrinth of life.

Boxwood is the most appropriate plant to use for creating this complex element. First of all, its biological properties make it the ideal choice for topiary, thanks to its small leaves and fast growth. But, most importantly, its meanings perfectly fit with the symbolism of the



■ Fig. 4.6.e View of the Labyrinth.



■ Fig. 4.6.f View of the Labyrinth.



■ Fig. 4.6.g View of the Labyrinth and the small tower at the center.



■ Fig. 4.6.h View of the Labyrinth.



■ Fig. 4.6.i Detail of a boxwood hedge.

Valsanzibio labyrinth: like the maze itself, boxwood is a representation of the cycle of life; its name probably derives from a root that means “growth”, and thus recall the personal growth of the visitor; it symbolizes the perseverance that is needed to reach the central tower; it is associated with the concept of rebirth. When one reaches the end of the path, his view is no longer covered by the hedges, that prevent him from understanding infinity, like in Leopardi’s poem.

Furthermore, there are other reasons that explain why boxwood is extensively used all over the Valsanzibio Garden, not only in the Labyrinth. This shrub is in fact a symbol of divine Salvation, as the whole garden is. It is associated with the Roman idea of *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place. As pointed out in Montale’s verses, it is a solemn plant. Finally, as it is evergreen, it is perfect for a place that is meant to be ideal, eternal, transcendental.

4.7 THE HERMIT’S GROTTA AND THE ROLE OF PLANE TREE

The Hermit’s Grotto, located in the south-west quadrant of the Barbarigo Garden, is a place for reflection and meditation. Near it, a specimen of plane tree can be found. In this section, the significance of plane tree in Italian culture will be explored, and its relationship with the Hermit’s Grotto will be discussed.

4.7.1 Plane tree: biology and history

Platanus acerifolia is a deciduous tree, belonging to the family *Platanaceae*.¹ It is commonly known as “London plane tree.” It is thought to be a hybrid of *Platanus orientalis*, a species native of Greece and Western Asia, and *Platanus occidentalis*, native of Northern America.

This species can grow up to 30 meters tall. Its bark is smooth and exfoliating; its leaves are palmately lobed, 10 to 20 centimeters long and 12 to 25 centimeters broad; its flowers grow in spherical inflorescences. *Platanus acerifolia* is resistant to low temperatures and wind.

The origin of this species dates back to the 17th century, when the hybridization of *Platanus orientalis* and *Platanus occidentalis* occurred, probably in Spain or in London. Plane trees, however, have been cultivated as ornamental plants since ancient times: they were, in fact, important plants in Persian gardens. They were later introduced in Italy during Roman times.

¹ The family *Platanaceae* includes eight species.

4.7.2 Plane tree: meaning of the name

Plane tree's Italian name is *platano*. This word comes from the Latin *platanus*, meaning "plane tree," which comes from the Greek *plátanos* (πλατᾶνος), that indicates the plane tree as well. This term was derived from *platús* (πλατύς), meaning "broad, flat": it can be assumed that the tree got this name because of its broad leaves or its flat patches of bark.

4.7.3 Plane tree: symbolism

In the Minoan civilization, the plane tree was sacred to the Great Mother, a goddess that was usually represented with her hand open, in the act of blessing: that is, the same shape of this plant's leaf. Later, in Greece, the plane tree came to be associated with Helen, who was a symbol of femininity.

According to legend, Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460 - c. 370 BCE), who is considered the "father of medicine," used to teach under a plane tree in the island of Kos, in the east of the Mediterranean Sea. To this day, in the center of the main town of that island, there is a specimen of *Platanus orientalis*, which is five hundred years old and may be a descendant of the original tree.

Also Greek philosophers and writers used to discuss and teach under the shadow of these plants: in fact, at the Academy of Athens¹ there was a sacred grove of plane trees. In a dialogue written by the philosopher Plato (428/427 or 424/423 - 348/347 BCE), founder of the Academy, one of the characters, Phaedrus, leads the philosopher Socrates (c. 470 - 499) to a plane tree, so that they can discuss under its shade. At that point, Socrates comments:

By Here, a fair resting-place, full of summer sounds and scents. Here is this lofty and spreading plane-tree, . . . and the stream which flows beneath the plane-tree is deliciously cold to the feet. Judging from the ornaments and images, this must be a spot sacred to Achelous² and the Nymphs. How delightful is the breeze: so very sweet; and there is a sound in the air shrill and summerlike which makes answer to the chorus of the cicadae. But the greatest charm of all is the grass, like a pillow gently sloping to the head. My dear Phaedrus, you have been an admirable guide. (360 BCE)

Since then, this tree came to be associated with philosophical discussions. This idea is, for example, proposed in the *De Oratore* ("On the Orator"), a dialogue written by Roman orator and philosopher Cicero (106-43 BCE) in 55 BCE:

1 The Academy was a school of philosophy located outside the walls of Athens. It was founded by Greek philosopher Plato (428/427 or 424/423 - 348/347 BCE) around 387 BCE and destroyed by Roman dictator Sulla (138-78 BCE) in 86 BCE. The Academy was the first institution of higher learning in the Western world. Prominent Greek philosopher Aristotle (348-322 BCE) studied here from 367 to 347 BCE.

2 In Greek mythology, Achelous was the god associated with the Achelous river, the largest river in Greece.

Why should not we, Crassus, imitate Socrates in the *Phaedrus* of Plato? For this plane-tree of yours has put me in mind of it, which diffuses its spreading boughs to over-shade this place, not less widely than that did whose covert Socrates sought, and which seems to me to have grown not so much from the rivulet which is described, as from the language of Plato: and what Socrates, with the hardest of feet, used to do, that is, to throw himself on the grass, while he delivered those sentiments which philosophers say were uttered divinely, may surely, with more justice, be allowed to my feet. (55 BCE/1855, p. 150)

In the Bible, on the other hand, the plane tree has a different meaning. It is mentioned in chapter 30 of the Genesis, together with the poplar and the almond tree. According to Saint Ambrose (c. 340 - 397), these three plants represent the Trinity, and the plane tree is associated with the Holy Spirit and symbolizes fecundity (because the grapevine, in order to give abundant fruits, often attaches itself to such tree). Roman writer Paulinus of Nola (c. 354 - 431) proposed a slightly different interpretation: he still considered the plane tree a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but said that, as the tree offers shadow and protection, in the same way the Holy Spirit gave a child to Mary (Schievenin, 2014, pp. 251-252).

4.7.4 Plane tree: literature

The plane tree is first mentioned in the *Iliad*, an ancient Greek epic poem composed around the 8th century BCE. Here, this plant has an oracular function, as the heroes, before their departure to Troy, make sacrifices to the gods under a plane tree:

We were ranged round about a fountain offering hecatombs¹ to the gods upon their holy altars, and there was a fine plane-tree from beneath which there welled a stream of pure water. Then we saw a prodigy; for Jove sent a fearful serpent out of the ground, with blood-red stains upon its back, and it darted from under the altar on to the plane-tree. (Homer, n.d., book 2)

The connection between this plant and the divine world is found again in the *Description of Greece* written by Greek geographer Pausanias (c. 110 - c. 180). The author, in fact, narrates that the Greek king Alexander the Great once had a prophetic dream while sleeping under a plane tree:

It is said that Alexander was hunting on Mount Pagus,² and that after the hunt was over he came to a sanctuary of the Nemeses,³ and found there a spring and a plane-tree in front of the sanctuary, growing over the water. While he slept under the

1 In ancient Greece, a hecatomb was a sacrifice of 100 cattle to the gods.

2 Mount Pagus is a hill in Asia Minor (currently Turkey), near the ancient Greek city of Smyrna (today called Izmir).

3 Nemesis is the Greek goddess who enacts retribution against those who show arrogance, foolish pride or dangerous overconfidence.



■ **Fig. 4.7.a** The Hermit's Grotto and a plane tree branch.



■ **Fig. 4.7.b** The Hermit's Grotto.



■ **Fig. 4.7.c** A plane tree near the Hermit's Grotto.



■ **Fig. 4.7.d** A plane tree near the Hermit's Grotto.

plane-tree it is said that the Nemeses appeared and bade him found a city there and to remove into it the Smyrnaeans from the old city. (1918, par. 7.5.2)

In Greek and Roman literature, the plane tree is often mentioned: as a religious element, as a provider of shadow, as an element of a *locus amoenus* together with water, as a tree under which to discuss philosophy, compose poetry or play music, as a place for romantic encounters, as a witness of prodigious or historical events, as a symbol of wealth and luxury.

During the Middle Ages, this plant is forgotten for centuries, and is rediscovered with the Renaissance, when it acquires back all the meanings it had in ancient times. In 1743, for example, when the “Accademia dei Trasformati,” an academy dedicated to the study of Italian language and literature, was founded in Milan, the plane tree was chosen as its symbol, as a call-back to the sacred grove of the ancient Athenian Academy. Italian poet Giuseppe Parini (1729-1799), member of the academy, praised this plant in a poem titled “The Study”:

And you, illustrious Plane tree, under whose grateful
Shadows I now sit again
To acquire the name of bard,
You constantly raise your branches . . . (1846, p. 235)¹

4.7.5 The Hermit’s Grotto

The Hermit’s Grotto is a place for meditation: after the journey in the Labyrinth, the visitor should come here and reflect. It has multiple meanings: it can be associated to pre-historic shelters, or to the condition of a fetus in its mother’s womb, or it can symbolize the irrational force of Nature. It reminds of the cave where the prophet Elijah (9th century BCE), in a moment of despair, went in order to reflect and meditate, and where, according to the Bible, he heard the voice of God (*King James Bible*, 1611, 1Ki 19). It can also be considered a reference to the famous “allegory of the cave” proposed by Plato in his best-known work, the *Republic*.

A plane tree can be found among the vegetation that surrounds the grotto. This plant has always had a close association with philosophy and with the activities of teaching and reflecting, since the time of Hippocrates, Plato and Cicero up to the modern age of Parini. Besides, it is considered a vehicle for divine inspiration, both in the Greek culture (the oracle in the *Iliad* and the dream of Alexander the Great) and in the Christian tradition (where it is associated with the Holy Spirit). Therefore, this plant is appropriate for a place dedicated to meditation and reflection: it can help the visitor to understand his own life, both through rationality and godly revelations.

¹ The poem has been translated into English by the author of this thesis.

4.8 THE RABBIT ISLAND AND THE ROLE OF CEDAR

The Rabbit Island, located in the north-west quadrant of the Barbarigo Garden, is a representation of the idea of immanence. Near it, a specimen of cedar can be found, that was planted in 1665. In this section, the significance of cedar in Italian culture will be explored, and its relationship with the Rabbit Island will be discussed.

4.8.1 Cedar: biology and history

Calocedrus decurrens is an evergreen tree, belonging to the family *Cupressaceae*. It is commonly known as “incense cedar.” It is native of the western part of North America.

This species can grow up to 60 meters tall. Its bark is orange-brown; its scale-like leaves are 2 to 15 millimeters long; its seed cones are 20 to 35 millimeters long, and have a green-yellow color. *Calocedrus decurrens* can tolerate both hot and cold climates. It usually grows in full sun, but it needs to be sheltered from strong winds.

This plant was used by Native Americans of California for its medicinal properties. After the discovery of America, the first specimens were brought to Europe in the 17th century. In fact, the tree that can be seen today near the Rabbit Island of the Barbarigo Garden is one of the oldest specimens of *Calocedrus decurrens* in Europe, if not the oldest.

4.8.2 Cedar: meaning of the name

Cedar’s Italian name is *cedro*. This word comes from the Latin *cedrus*, meaning “cedar, juniper,” which comes from the Greek *kédros* (κέδρος), that indicates cedars and junipers as well. Its etymology is unknown, but there are some hypotheses: one has it that this word comes from the Hebrew *qatar*, meaning “to smudge,” as the plant was used in rituals of purification; according to another, the origin of cedar’s name derives from the Sanskrit *devdar*, meaning “timber of the gods.”

4.8.3 Cedar: symbolism

Because of its big dimensions, the cedar is associated with greatness, force and nobility. Besides, as it is an evergreen plant, it is a symbol of immortality and eternity.

This species is the tree that is mentioned the most times in the Old Testament of the Bible, appearing seventy times (Mercurio, 2019), and being always praised and admired:

The trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted . . . (King James Bible, 1611, Ps 104:6)

Solomon, king of Israel in the 10th century BCE, considered cedars the first of the trees:

And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall . . . (*King James Bible*, 1611, 1Ki 4:33)

In fact, both his palace and the Temple of Jerusalem were built with wood from this plant:

And, behold, I purpose to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord spake unto David my father, saying, Thy son, whom I will set upon thy throne in thy room, he shall build an house unto my name. Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon . . . (*King James Bible*, 1611, 1Ki 5:5-6)

In the Bible, the cedar acquires a variety of meanings: it represents firmness and stability, but also arrogance and pride; it symbolizes Divine wisdom; it is associated with God's forgiveness; it is the emblem of the righteous; it is an element for ritual cleansing. Besides, this plant appears in other Christian traditions that are not mentioned in the Holy Scriptures: according to a legend, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in the Garden of Eden, was a cedar; another tale, instead, relates that cedar was one of the woods of which was made the cross on which Jesus Christ died.

Finally, according to the Christian theologian Origen (c. 184 - c. 253),

The cedar never rots; building with cedar the beams of our houses means preserving our souls from corruption. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1986, vol. 1, p. 240)

4.8.4 Cedar: painting

Because of their symbolic meanings and associations, cedars often appear in Renaissance paintings with religious subjects. An example is the *San Marco Altarpiece* (fig. 4.8.a) by Fra Angelico (c. 1395 - 1455), where the background is filled with trees, such as cypresses or palms, each of whom has a specific meaning.

However, until the 17th century, in Italian paintings the cedar is often confused with the citron (*Citrus medica*), as both plants in Italian are called *cedro*. Therefore, when the yellow fruits of citron are depicted in Renaissance paintings, their meanings and symbolisms should be interpreted as if they are cedars. An example is the *Immaculate* (fig. 4.8.b) by Marco Palmezzano (1459-1539), where, in the top right corner, there are two trees: a citron and a cypress.

The same mistake was made by Michelangelo (1475-1564) in one of his most famous paintings, the *Doni Tondo* (fig. 4.8.c). Here, the citron tree depicted in the background is contrasted with a plant of hyssop placed in the middle ground, in front of Saint John the Baptist. This combination of species is a visual representation of a quote by the Frankish Benedictine monk and theologian Rabanus Maurus (c. 780-856):



■ Fig. 4.8.a Fra Angelico (c. 1395 - 1455), *San Marco Altarpiece*, 1438-1443, 220 x 227 cm, Museum of San Marco, Florence.



■ Fig. 4.8.b Marco Palmezzano (1459-1539), *Immaculate*, 450 x 250 cm, Abbey of San Mercuriale, Forlì.



■ Fig. 4.8.c Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), *Doni Tondo*, 1506, 120 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

From the Cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop which grows on a stony wall we have an explanation of the Divinity which Christ has in his Father and of his humanity that he derives from the Virgin Mary. (Levi d'Ancona, 1968, p. 46)

4.8.5 Cedar: literature

The cedar appears in some notable works of modern Italian writers, where it assumes an existential meaning.

In *Boredom*, a novel by Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), the protagonist, Dino, crashes against a plane tree and is hospitalized. While lying in the hospital bed, he spends his days contemplating a cedar that he can see from the window:

I took to gazing at it [the cedar] for hours, my head turned sideways on the pillow as I lay on my back in bed. . . . I gazed at the tree and experienced a feeling of absolute but calm and stabilizing despair, such as one might well feel after passing through a crisis which, though not decisive, may yet be supposed to be the greatest that one can face. . . . I had no thoughts, I simply wondered when and how I had recognized the reality of the tree, had recognized, in other words, its existence as an object which was different from myself, had no relationship with me, and yet was there and could not be ignored. (1960/2011, pp. 317-318)

This plant is also the protagonist of the short novel “The Cedar of Lebanon,” written by Grazia Deledda (1871-1936). The story begins with a small cedar tree appearing in the garden of a family’s house. The gardener explains that:

It is a plant that lasts for thousands of years. In fact, it is on its hundredth year that it blossoms for the first time. I don’t know this flower, I’ve never seen it: but it must be beautiful and big like a blue flag. (1939/1996, p. 116)

The tree accompanies the life of the family, and the novel ends with a reflection on it:

Children see better than grown-ups the wonders of the earth near them: a pebble, an oat stem, a red ladybug are miracles, for them: and aren’t they for real? Little Piti, the youngest of the family – eighteen months old – is intent on studying these mysteries . . . then, with a weird declaration, maybe the first of her life, she affirms to herself and to what is around her:

– All Piti’s, oh!

Yes, everything belongs to Piti; who can take it away from her? Even the big tree is hers: it is hers more than the other humble and temporary things around: it is a brother to her, as it was to the children that preceded her and as it will be to those who will follow: until its first blossom, the high flower that will wave in the sky like a flag made of the very blue of the heaven, will bless the generations that have believed with faith and joy in its legend. (1939/1996, pp. 118-119)



■ Fig. 4.8.d The Rabbit Island.



■ Fig. 4.8.e The Rabbit Island and a cedar.



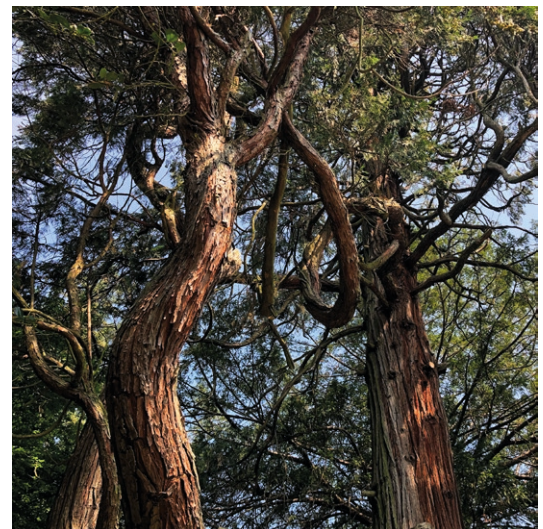
■ Fig. 4.8.f The Rabbit Island.



■ Fig. 4.8.g The Rabbit Island and a Cedar.



■ Fig. 4.8.h A cedar near the Rabbit Island.



■ Fig. 4.8.i A cedar near the Rabbit Island.

4.8.6 The Rabbit Island

The Rabbit Island has an elliptical shape and is surrounded by a moat and a decorated fence. Here, one can find different animals: the rabbits living and breeding on the island, the birds caged in the central aviary, and the fish, swimming in the moat. All these creatures are somehow trapped: the island is a happy place, but they cannot go out of its boundaries. This is a metaphor of the human condition: the soul is trapped inside the body and is forced to comply with the trivial tasks needed to survive – eat, sleep and reproduce.

The imposing cedar tree that grows just outside the island is, on the other hand, a symbol of the eternity and transcendence of God. Cedar is, in fact, the “tree of God” and is believed to be preserved from corruption. As in Moravia’s and Deledda’s stories, this tree assumes an existential meaning: it is almost a “superhuman” element that, being practically eternal, witnesses our finite human lives and our trivial everyday activities.

4.9 THE STATUE OF TIME AND THE ROLE OF YEW

The Statue of Time, located in the north-east quadrant of the Barbarigo Garden, is a representation of the idea of transcendence. It is surrounded by some specimens of yew, some of which are more than 350 years old. In this section, the significance of yew in Italian culture will be explored, and its relationship with the Statue of Time will be discussed.

4.9.1 Yew: biology

Taxus baccata is an evergreen tree, belonging to the family *Taxaceae*, commonly referred to as “yew.”¹ It is generally known as “common yew.” Its native range includes Europe, Western Asia and North Africa.

This species can grow up to 20 meters tall. Its bark is thin and scaly; its flat leaves are 1 to 4 centimeters long, and 2 to 3 millimeters broad; its seed cones contain a single seed, 4 to 7 millimeters long, that turns into a red berry-like aril. *Taxus baccata* can tolerate both hot and cold climates and can grow both in sunny and shady positions.

4.9.2 Yew: meaning of the name

Yew’s Italian name is *tasso*. This word comes from the Latin *taxus*, meaning “yew,” which comes from the Proto-Iranian **taxša*, that indicates the yew as well. This term is probably related to the Proto-Indo-European root **tek^{w-}*, that means “to flee, run”: it can be as-

1 The family *Taxaceae* includes around 30 species.



■ **Fig. 4.9.a** Girolamo dei Libri (1474/1475-1555), *Nativity with Rabbits*, c. 1500, 217 x 151 cm, Castelvecchio Museum, Verona.



■ **Fig. 4.9.b** Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445 - 1510), *Primavera*, 1482, 203 x 314 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

sumed that the tree got this name because of its poisonous leaves, bark and seeds.

4.9.3 Yew: symbolism

As the most prominent feature of the yew is that it is poisonous, it has always been associated to death: in fact, in Italian it is also known as *albero della morte* (“tree of death”). Ancient peoples, like the Celts, used to plant this tree near cemeteries, and this tradition has been kept throughout the centuries in many European countries, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

On the other hand, the yew is also famous for its longevity, as it can live for two thousand years, or even five thousand years, according to some scholars. Therefore, this plant is also a symbol of immortality and wisdom. Representing both death and immortality, the yew has become an emblem of the eternal cycle of death and rebirth, where death means the beginning of a new life for the soul. Some ancient Germanic peoples considered it the “tree of rebirth” and associated it with the winter solstice, the celebration of the sun’s rebirth.

Among the Greeks, the yew was considered an entranceway to the underworld and was sacred to Hecate, the goddess of necromancy, sorcery, ghosts, witchcraft, night, and poisonous plants. It was also used during the mysterious rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries as a symbol of death and immortality, of the eternity that one will find after the end of the earthly life.

4.9.4 Yew: painting

Also in painting, the yew represents the “tree of death.” For example, in Girolamo dei Libri’s (1474/1475-1555) *Nativity with Rabbits*, the painter combines this plant with the pomegranate, that represents the “tree of life.”

Furthermore, a yew can be found in one of the Renaissance’s most famous paintings: the *Primavera* (“Spring”) by Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445 - 1510). Here, the painter has represented several classical mythological characters in a garden full of plants of hundreds of different species: an allegory of spring, fertility, rebirth. The yew tree, in particular, is located on the left side, behind the oranges.

4.9.5 Yew: literature

Roman poets and writers associated the yew with death. In the *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid described the pathway that leads to the underworld:

A shelving path in shadows of sad yew
Through utter silence to the deep descends,



■ Fig. 4.9.c The Statue of Time.



■ Fig. 4.9.d The Statue of Time and some yew branches.



■ Fig. 4.9.e Detail of a yew near the Statue of Time.



■ Fig. 4.9.f The Statue of Time.

Infernal, where the languid Styx¹ exhales
 Vapours; and there the shadows of the dead,
 Descend, after they leave their sacred urns,
 And ghostly forms invade: and far and wide,
 Those dreary regions Horror and bleak Cold
 Obtain (8/1922, book 4)

Also the Roman writer and philosopher Seneca (c. 4 BCE - 65 CE) proposed a similar image in the tragedy *Hercules furens* (“The Mad Hercules”):

The foul pool of Cocytus² sluggish stream lies here; here the vulture, there the dole-bringing owl utters its cry, and the sad omen of the gruesome screech-owl sounds. The leaves shudder, black with gloomy foliage where sluggish Sleep clings to the overhanging yew, where sad Hunger lies with wasted jaws, and Shame, too late, hides her guilt-burdened face. Dread stalks there, gloomy Fear and gnashing Pain, sable Grief, tottering Disease and iron-girt War; and last of all slow Age supports his steps upon a staff. (1917)

In modern times, the poet and writer Gabriele d’Annunzio (1863-1938) mentioned this plant in his play *The Daughter of Jorio*, where Mila, one of the characters, asks to Anna Onna for a poisonous yew berry in order to commit suicide:

Anna Onna, put me to sleep! . . .
 The skin I will give you, too, the sheepskin
 You were sleeping on here to-day.
 If you give me some of those red seed-pods,
 The red pods you know – twigs of the nasso.³ (1906/1916, pp. 133-134)

It can be seen that in both ancient and modern literature, the yew has a strong association with the idea of death.

4.9.6 The Statue of Time

The statue of Time represents Chronos, the Greek god of time: a winged old man with a long beard, holding an hourglass in his hand and carrying a heavy rock on his shoulders. His wings are a reference to how fast time passes, while the hourglass represents its measure and limitedness. The rock, on the other hand, is a dodecahedron, a polyhedron with twelve faces, like the twelve months of the year. A verse is inscribed on the basement of the statue: “Hours fly with Time and years run out.” While the Rabbit Island is a symbol of the imma-

1 In Greek mythology, the Styx is the marsh that lies at the center of the underworld.

2 In Greek mythology, Cocytus is a river that surrounds the underworld.

3 *Nasso* is a name for the yew tree in some dialects of the Abruzzo region, in southern Italy. Gabriele d’Annunzio was from this region, and *The Daughter of Jorio* is set here.

nence of the human body, the Statue of Time is a representation of the transcendence of the human soul, that can put on wings and surpass its limits.

Yew is the “tree of death,” that according to ancient legends and myths adorned the entrance path to the underworld: and death is, in fact, the entrance way through which the human soul has to pass in order to transcend the limitedness of the body and achieve immortality.

4.10 EAST AND WEST

Throughout history, every civilization that has created gardens, has done it with the purpose of translating into reality its utopias, of expressing in a tangible way its worldview and its idea of harmony (Beruete, 2016/2018, pp. 9-17). Both the Master of Nets Garden and the Barbarigo Garden are prime examples of this: however, the conceptions of harmony that they reveal are radically different. In the West, there is a clear hierarchy, in which human beings are the center of the universe and use science and technology to dominate and control Nature. Humanity has given by God unique privileges, including superiority over all other creatures, while Nature has been created only “to allow human life to be accomplished” (Wu, 2011, p. 69). The core of Christian doctrine is the Salvation of humans, not of animals or plants. In the Western anthropocentric worldview, Humankind and Nature are two completely separate things, the former holding power over the latter. This is reflected in the Barbarigo Garden, which is explicitly dedicated to the divine salvation of humans. The natural elements that compose the garden, such as plants and water, but also the way in which the surrounding landscape is used, are only means that help the visitor to travel through the Salvation Path and thus achieve his purpose. On the other hand, the Master of Nets Garden does not seem to embody such ideas. While, of course, it has been designed as a comfortable place in which people can enjoy life and practice a variety of activities, its purpose is not to lead visitors to a transcendent truth that lies beyond reality, but to help them merge with the flux of the universe: that is, to understand the deep unity that connects them to the very rocks, water, plants and animals that surround them and that are not considered inferior to humans. The whole third chapter of this research accurately demonstrates how all the details of every single section of the Master of Nets Garden were created with these ideas in mind: whether meditating, playing music or practicing calligraphy, the people in the garden would be stimulated to feel a sense of peace and tranquility, to feel that they are part of the cosmic flow.

Another aspect that characterizes both the Barbarigo Garden and the Master of Nets

Garden is the idea of creating a microcosm that is supposed to reflect the macrocosm, of revealing the deeper reality that underlies the world. In Renaissance gardens, this means exposing the rational, mathematical, geometrical order of reality, according to a mechanistic cosmology that emphasizes the quantitative aspect of natural phenomena over the qualitative. It is an intellectual, metaphysical construction that only the human mind can comprehend. There is only one rational path to follow, one point of view from which to observe objective geometrical perspectives. The garden becomes an abstract, mathematical object available to the gaze of a human subject. Again, Chinese classical gardens seem to be radically different. The Master of Nets Garden tries to replicate – and to improve – the spontaneity and irregularity of Nature. Its complex spaces allow visitors to wander freely, choosing the paths that they prefer and enjoying a variety of views, inspired by the perspective of Chinese landscape paintings, that do not follow fixed mathematical rules.

The role of plants is also different in the two gardens. In the Barbarigo Garden, in fact, they are usually important only for their symbolic value, that tends to have only one correct interpretation that fits into a clear, predetermined allegorical path. In the Master of Nets Garden, on the other hand, every plant has a variety of ambiguous meanings, that are open to the interpretations of the visitors, but has also equally relevant practical and aesthetic functions, such as providing shadow, color, pleasing scents and sounds, delicious fruits, medicines, climatic comfort and elaborate conceptions of space. In other words, in Chinese classical gardens there is a much stronger collaboration between plants and space, thus achieving a deep integration between Architecture and Nature.

This comparison has helped bring to light and define some of the features that make Chinese classical gardens so radically different from Western ones in their relationship with Nature: an idea of harmony in which all creatures are part of the cosmic flow, an atmosphere of peace and tranquility that stimulates humans to join this flow, a reality based on spontaneity, an openness to different choices, interpretations and points of view, and an integration between natural and architectural elements. In the following chapter, these concepts will be explored in order to comprehend in depth the relationship between Humankind and Nature in the Chinese tradition, to understand how such relationship was expressed in gardens, and to learn as much as possible from this, in order to achieve in contemporary architecture a greater natural, social and interior harmony.

5. WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

5.1 HUMANS AND NATURE IN THE CHINESE TRADITION

The analysis of the Master of Nets Garden, conducted in chapters 2 and 3 of this research, has brought out several interesting elements that hint to how the relationship between humans and Nature worked in the Chinese tradition. In chapter 4, by contrasting them with the different approaches adopted in the West, those elements have become clearer. At this point, it is time to put in order these ideas and synthesize the main principles that regulate the Chinese way of relating with Nature: this will be the purpose of the present section of the research.

First, the context in which the Chinese civilization was born will be analyzed: specifically, the geographical features of the environment and the first approach to agriculture. Secondly, the spiritual aspect of the human-Nature relationship will be explored, with an analysis of the *yin-yang* principle and an overview of the three main thought traditions of China: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. This is especially important because, differently from the West,

Ecological concerns occupy the central parts of Chinese philosophies and religions. Harmony among the gods, humanity and nature is the ultimate goal of Chinese tradition; Taoism, above all. (Wu, 2011, p. 2)

Thirdly, the role of Nature in Chinese sciences and arts will be described and will be contrasted with the Western point of view. In particular, two concepts will be discussed: that of epistemology and that of landscape. Finally, the last paragraph of this section will relate everything back to the main topic of this research: gardens.

5.1.1 Geography

In order to understand what kind of relationship the Chinese people used to have with Nature, it is first necessary to analyze the environment in which they lived.

The most remarkable feature of the country are mountains, that cover a great part of China's surface. Most of them are too steep and rocky for agriculture, so they remained wild and untouched throughout the centuries. They were seen as mystical places, rich of magical and religious meanings. Sacred mountains were located all over the country: at its center, as well as in correspondence with the four cardinal points. Temples and shrines were built on

them, and poets and painters celebrated their beauty and spiritual value.

The second key element of the Chinese landscape is constituted by water. There are three main river basins: the Yellow River in the north, the Yangzi River in the center and the Pearl River in the south. In order to prevent floods, ensure proper irrigation in the fields and allow commerce, the Chinese civilization had to develop sophisticated technologies and build dams and canals all over the country.

Finally, the third element is climate. China enjoys a temperate climate with four seasons, but the temperatures are not as mild as in Europe and in the Mediterranean: therefore, winters are colder and summers are hotter, giving a deeper significance and characterization to each part of the year. Spring, in particular, was very important, as it marked the end of a cold, icy winter. In autumn, on the other hand, an incredible variety of colors was displayed by the foliage of trees. This was possible because China has a greater number of plant species than any other temperate region of the world.

Just from this brief description one can already grasp the some of the basic concepts that regulate the relationship between humans and Nature in the Chinese tradition: natural elements have a deep, sacred value, but they can be transformed and improved by humans, as they are themselves in constant transformation.

5.1.2 Agriculture

Since ancient times, the Chinese civilization was centered on agriculture. People used to venerate the rain and the mother earth, in a “religion of agrarian fertility” (Keswick, 1978, p. 29). Humans were not considered different from or superior to other creatures, as their well-being relied on a successful cooperation with natural forces: a harmony that remained for centuries the core of Chinese thoughts and beliefs.

This harmony was not to be accepted passively: humans had to actively play their role, improving Nature in order to realize its full potential. According to many historians, in fact, the Chinese civilization was the one that had the greatest effect on its own environment, resulting in an incredible agricultural productivity (Keswick, 1978, p. 29). As this interaction proved its positive effects, the relationship between Humans and Nature was seen as a successful cooperation, rather than a dynamic of domination and subjugation.

5.1.3 Yin and yang

The concepts of *yin* and *yang* are the basis of the Chinese worldview. They do not describe actual things but “attributes of a whole which are opposite or complementary to one another” (Wu, 2011, p. 103). *Yin* is the passive, female principle, associated to darkness,

night, earth, emptiness, weakness, softness, while *yang* is the active, male principle, that represents light, heaven, fullness, strength, hardness. However, such categorization is not absolute, but relative, flexible, transformative. Anything can be both *yin* and *yang*, depending on the relationship that is considered: for example, a man is *yin* in relation to his father but *yang* in relation to his son. Besides, *yin* can become *yang* and vice versa: for example, night turns into day, and then into night again, in the ceaseless cycle of time. *Yin* and *yang* are not hostile entities that seek to annihilate each other: they are in a relationship of balance and interdependence, where each principle plays an equally essential role in the flow of the universe.

As explained by Stanislaus Fung, the relationship that has just been described is one of polarism:

A relationship of two terms each of which can only be explained by reference to the other. . . . each term in polar relation requires the other “as a necessary condition for being what they are.” (2002, p. 108)

This is completely different from the concept of dualism, which is the core of Western thought, generating dualistic categories such as universal and particular, cause and effect, theory and practice, artificial and natural, subject and object, physics and metaphysics.

While the West built its worldview on the idea of dualism, the Chinese civilization had at its foundations the polar principles of *yin* and *yang*. As illustrated in the following paragraphs, harmony and balance between complementary attributes is the foundation of the spiritual and artistic traditions of China.

5.1.4 Confucianism

Confucianism was first developed around the 6th and 5th century BCE by Confucius, who claimed that humans are part of the cosmos, and that through their actions they have to maintain balance in the cosmic cycle of change and transformation. In his *Inscription on the Western Chamber*, Confucian thinker Zhang Zai (1020-1077) wrote:

I regard everything in the universe as my body, and the force that directs the universe as my nature. . . . He who knows the principles of transformation will skillfully carry forward the undertakings of Heaven and Earth, and he who penetrates spirituality to the highest degree will carry out their will. . . . In life I will follow and serve Heaven and Earth, and in death I will be at peace. (as cited in Chan, 1963, pp. 497-498)

According to him, humans carry out the will of Heaven and Earth, in perfect harmony with them. Similar ideas can be found in the writings of another Confucian scholar, Dong

Zhongshu (179-104 BCE):

Heaven, Earth and man are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and man brings them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, Earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and man completes them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with. (*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1960, vol. 1, p. 101)

Confucians thought that human nature is inherently good, and thus that humans and their creations naturally fit in the environment. All creatures have a place and play a role in the great order of the cosmos, and “everything interacts and affects everything else” (Tucker, 1991, p. 62), in a constant transformation, a ceaseless movement that gives birth to new life.

According to the Confucian worldview, a person can achieve his full humanity, and therefore unity with the cosmos, by cultivating his own spirituality and moral character, and this could be accomplished by practicing the arts of the scholars: literature, painting, calligraphy, conversation, music and flower appreciation, among the others. These activities were to be held in the middle of Nature, in peace and tranquility, so that one could really feel the harmonious unity with Heaven and Earth. Nature was not to be exploited by humankind, but was rather the vehicle through which one gained knowledge and worked on his own self-development.

5.1.5 Daoism

The second great thought tradition of China is Daoism, started by Lao Zi and Zhuangzi between the 6th and the 4th century BCE. While Confucianism and Buddhism as well played an important role in defining the relationship between humans and Nature in the Chinese tradition, it was Daoism that had the greatest influence in this field, and it can be asserted that Chinese classical gardens are primarily an expression of Daoist thought.

To the Daoists, there is no distinction between “supernatural,” “natural” and “human”: Heaven, Earth and man are all expressions of the *Dao*, and everything is strongly interrelated. The word “*Dao*,” that can be translated as “way” or “path,” indicates the fundamental order of the universe, its absolute principle, the totality of things that exist and that are connected in a relationship of interdependence. The *Dao* is not static, but in a constant process of transformation. British scholar James Miller (b. 1962) explains that it

is understood as a kind of watery abyss or deep spring . . . from which liquid vitality emerges. . . . [The] “myriad things,” the humans, animals, plants, trees, rocks, and

such, are understood as taking place within the flow of biological time, constituted by the liquid vitality flowing from the previous generation into the successive generation. (2017, p. 47)

Like the Dao and Nature, also human life is seen as a process of transformation, in which “a radical process of continuous cultivation” is “the best mode of engagement between the individual and his or her environmental context” (Miller, 2017, p. 88). The main goal towards which this cultivation is directed is a state of peace in which one forgets about himself and merges completely with the flow of the universe, synchronizing his rhythm with that of the natural forces. In order to do this, one has to draw vitality from Nature, contemplating its elements and phenomena, meditating and reflecting, absorbing its virtue. According to Lao Zi, humans should “follow the earth,” which “follows heaven,” which “follows Dao,” which follows “what is naturally so” (2015, ch. 25): in Daoism there is a strong desire for convergence with Nature.

One of the basic concepts outlined in the classic texts of this tradition is *wu wei*, or “non-action”: that means that a person should not take any action that is contrary to Nature, including his own inner nature. Closely related to this idea is that of *ziran*, “spontaneity,” “naturalness,” or, as British philosopher David E. Cooper (b. 1942) translates it, “self-so-ness” (2014). According to this principle, one should allow things to develop and express their natural essence:

It is this spontaneity that the [Daoist] texts identify with convergence with nature. The calls for simplicity, suspicion of technology and scholarship, and the setting aside of artificial conventions are not a summons to return to a state of nature. They eulogise, rather, a form of life hospitable to the spontaneity that is barely discernible in complex urban societies. “Attuned” to things and spontaneously responding to them, a person “arrives up beyond them to the source of things.” (D. E. Cooper, 2014, p. 105)

In merging with the flow of the universe, however, the differences between humans and other forms of life should not be obliterated. Balance and naturalness are achieved only when each creature expresses its own peculiar essence, and that of humans lies in helping other beings express theirs:

It is a convergence [with nature], rather, that we achieve when our lives are “on the Way,” consonant with the dao that holds sway over nature as a whole. We achieve this, however, not by returning to a state of nature. . . . We do so, rather, through cultivating mindful, spontaneous responsiveness to the world, and by exercising the distinctive human *de* or “virtue” of appreciating and nurturing the “self-so-ness,” the dao-given natures, of the other beings with whom our world is shared. (D. E. Cooper, 2014, p. 108)

5.1.6 Buddhism

Buddhism, the third great tradition, originated in India and started to be present in China around the 1st century BCE, where it was heavily influenced by Chinese culture and mindset, and especially by Daoist thought.

According to Buddhist teachings, a person, through deep and persistent meditation, can realize that all things are nothing but emptiness, and can therefore attain *nirvana*, a state of pure and supreme bliss. The *Heart Sutra*, one of the fundamental texts of East Asian Buddhism, states that “the five elements which make up anything [are] all quite empty of any real being,” and “all forms are really devoid of form, and emptiness is no different from form” (Morris, 1983, p. 39).

Besides, Buddhist heaven can be reached not only through meditation, but also by cultivating one’s self and practicing morality and compassion towards all sentient beings. Every form of life is sacred, because everything is Buddha. Buddhist monasteries were often built in gorgeous natural settings. Those in the cities, on the other hand, were provided with courtyards filled with trees: they were among the few places where common people would be able to get in touch with Nature in a spiritual way.

5.1.7 Epistemology

After an overview of the spiritual traditions of China, carried out in the previous paragraphs, it is now important to understand the Chinese approach towards the study of natural phenomena. In fact, while in the West the curiosity to understand how Nature worked has led to the birth of science, in China this did not happen. The reason for this absence has to be researched once again in the profound differences between the worldviews of the two civilizations: specifically, their distinct epistemologies, that is their ways of getting to know Nature.

First of all, in their relationship with natural elements the Western and the Chinese peoples had radically different goals. Since the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece, in fact, the aspiration of European scholars was to understand Nature by revealing, through the use of logic and rationality, the truth that lied behind its appearances. On the other hand, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, the purpose of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist wisdom was to achieve peace and harmony. The Chinese did not have the desire of getting to know Nature because they did not think of it as something distinct from humans: for them, everything was Dao. In the West, instead, people viewed themselves as something essentially different from Nature, therefore they had the curiosity of trying to understand it.

The fundamental difference between the two worldviews lies precisely in this: the sep-

aration between subject and object. The model of Western epistemology assumes that observer and observed object are two separate entities, and that through logical reasoning the former can grasp its “defining ‘essence’ or ‘form’ or ‘function’ behind elusively changing appearances,” a reality that “is permanent,” and understand it “in representational terms that are isomorphic and unambiguous – a true copy impressed on one’s mind of that which exists externally and objectively” (Ames, 1993, pp. 54-55). Instead of researching causes, on the other hand, the Chinese way of knowing focuses on relationships:

Confucian knowing has as its goals a comprehensive and unobstructed awareness of interdependent conditions and their latent, vague possibilities, where the meaning and value of each element is a function of its own particular network of relationships. (Ames, 1991, p. 231)

For the Chinese, reason is not independent of experience, but consists in coherence, in “mapping out the local conditions that collaborate to sponsor any particular event or phenomenon” (Ames, 1993, p. 56). This way of thinking is defined as “correlative,” while the Western mindset is “causal.” This is directly related to the difference between polar relationship and dualism, discussed in paragraph 5.1.3. Correlative thinking means to understand the world in terms of *yin* and *yang*, of “correlated entities or processes of becoming each of which ‘does not derive its meaning and order from some transcendent source,’” while causal thinking “involves understanding the world by tracing cause/effect relationships of radically unequal and ‘substantial’ terms” (Fung, 2002, p. 109).

The separation between subject and object in Western thought means that Nature is objectified, analyzed, with elements rigidly categorized and defined, and getting to know it consists in achieving a “mirroring correspondence” between the external, objective world and the subjective representation in one’s mind” (Fung, 2002, p. 54). By contrast, for the Chinese getting to know Nature is a “participatory, creative and performative” act (Fung, 2002, p. 54), in which there is no distinction between theory and praxis: “to know is ‘to realize,’ to ‘make real’” (Ames, 1993, p. 57).

5.1.8 Landscape

Another element that plays a crucial role in defining the Chinese way of approaching Nature is the conception of “landscape,” which is radically different from the Western one. In European languages, “landscape” is defined as a portion of land as it presents itself to the gaze of an observer. This definition, argues François Jullien, has three important implications: first, that the “landscape” is a part of a larger whole (the “land”), as in the dualistic opposition part/whole typical of Western causal thought; second, that the landscape is to

be perceived visually (the dominance of sight over the other senses in Western tradition has been discussed in paragraph 4.5.5); third, that the landscape is an object that is separate from the subject that perceives it (2014/2017, pp. 11-13).

Jullien then explains that the Chinese conception of landscape, on the other hand, rejects these implications: the term that is used in China is *shan shui* (山水), that can be translated literally as “mountain-water.” Instead of being a portion of land that offers itself to an observer, landscape is a correlation of opposite elements, mountains and water, *yang* and *yin*. There is no external observer in front of Nature, no subjective point of view, no delimitation of a “portion” of land: humans are part of a total landscape that entails the entirety of Nature (pp. 25-29). Moreover, the relationship between human and landscape is not just a visual, contemplative relation, but unfolds itself in exploring, walking through the mountains and rivers, living inside the environment (pp. 33-37).

Throughout history, the concept of landscape has had a crucial importance in Chinese thought and art, much more than in the West, where it started to be theorized during the Renaissance, one thousand years later than in China. Jullien argues that, while European artists and philosophers were concerned on one hand with faith in an invisible, eternal, metaphysical Truth, and on the other hand with the political ideas of citizenship and freedom, the purpose of Chinese literati was to achieve harmony, vitality and longevity. For them, mountains and water were not a scenography, but the very source of life, of *qi* (vital energy), of spirituality: living in the middle of Nature was their highest aspiration (pp. 49-51).

5.1.9 Humans and Nature in Chinese classical gardens

In the previous paragraphs, it has been demonstrated that Chinese thought aims at achieving harmony between humans and Nature, living in balance with the natural principles of the universe. On the other hand, it has also been demonstrated how, throughout its history, the Chinese civilization has intervened massively on its natural environment, modifying and improving it. This paradox appears even more clearly in Chinese classical gardens: their purpose is to look as “natural” as possible, yet they are evidently man-made environments, created with artificial techniques such as those mentioned in paragraph 2.6.5.

In order to explain this apparent contradiction, it is first necessary to address the issue of Chinese landscape painting and its significance. According to Su Shi, there are two typologies of painting: the first, inferior, consists in depicting humans, animals and objects, for which the painter just needs the skill to faithfully reproduce their external appearance. The other, instead, is definitely superior and much more difficult, involving landscapes and

natural elements which lack a stable form. To paint them, the artist needs to see through their internal coherence, to understand their inner nature. He should not copy the shape of clouds or rocks, but rather understand the principle through which they come to life (Jullien, 2014/2017, pp. 38-41). A good landscape painting is one that captures the vitality of Nature and conveys it even to the people who are not able to go live in the mountains as hermits. As discussed previously, for Chinese literati the highest aspiration was to live in the middle of Nature: however, for the majority of them, this possibility was not an option, as they had to fulfil their duties towards society, the State, and their families. The purpose of landscape paintings was to give them an experience comparable to that of actually living in Nature, so that they could still have a way of getting in touch with the vitality of the universe: for this reason, the painted scrolls were not meant to “imitate” natural phenomena, but to give them life (Jullien, 2014/2017, pp. 51-52), and were not supposed to just be looked at, but to stimulate the imagination of the viewer, giving them the impression of actually being in the middle of the mountains or on the shore of a river.

Now, this whole reflection is valid for gardens as well. Artificiality is justified because the garden, like the paintings, is not meant to be an imitation of Nature, but to give life to a landscape that allows visitors to enjoy an experience analogous to that of traveling through deep valleys, wide lakes, wild peaks, or shaded groves.

Chinese classical gardens embodied in this way an idea of harmonious blending of human and natural. The garden does not represent “man’s effort to bring nature to his feet,” nor does it symbolize “man’s total sinking into insignificance in the face of her grandeur and beauty” (Chan, 2012, p. 30): it is one of the highest expression of harmony between Heaven and Earth, between Humankind and Nature.

In the garden, every element seems to have meanings and functions whose only purpose is to serve the humans that live in it, allowing them to practice different activities, feel various emotions and merge with the cosmic flow. At the same time, it looks like in the garden humans are dominated by Nature, belittled by the magnificence of rocks, water and plants, almost as if they were the most insignificant creatures. But this is the wrong way to look at it: there is no dichotomy between what is human and what is natural, no opposition, no hostility whatsoever. The garden is an expression of peaceful harmony: the elements of the garden allow its inhabitants to express their true inner nature, while the smallness of the humans magnifies and sublimate the beauty and significance of Nature.

This harmony is reflected also in the way in which the garden is created. The *Yuan Ye* in fact reads:

“Interdependence” means following the rise and fall of the site and investigating

its proper disposition, pruning the branches of obstructing trees, directing streams to flow over rocks so that they are mutually complementary, erecting pavilions and kiosks where appropriate, not interfering with out-of-the-way paths, and letting them wind and turn: this is what is called “excellent and appropriate.” (as cited in Fung, 2002, p. 114)

The designer of the garden is not an autonomous subject that projects his intentions on the site, the object. Again, the dualistic logic typical of the Western mindset is avoided, proposing instead an interdependence in which “assessing the land . . . is presented as a process that already opens up thinking, evokes design responses abstracted from the vast realm of possibilities without drawing its strength on a totalising picture of hard facts” (Fung, 2002, p. 118). In a sense, one could say that “the designer does the designing, but the designing also ‘does’ the designer” (Fung, 2002, p. 137). According to this idea, it could be also argued that the principle of “borrowing views,” described in paragraph 2.6.2, is “not merely a means of spatial composition, but . . . an important way of thinking in the artistic creation of gardens” (Fung, 2002, pp. 121-122). By “borrowing views,” the landscape and the intentions of the designer – as well as the sentiments of the visitors of the garden – establish a polar relation of interdependence, “an encounter of landscape and person” (Fung, 2002, p. 124).

Polar relations and dynamic balances are the basis not only of the concept of “borrowing views,” but of the whole garden, as “rhythm, . . . to the Chinese, is the highest of all conceivable values” (Chan, 2012, p. 31). In fact, while in the West the Christian God is an eternal, immutable, transcendental entity, the Chinese concept of Dao is the opposite: a path, a flow, a dynamic harmony of *yin* and *yang*. This fundamental difference helps explaining why Italian Renaissance gardens are static and geometric, while in Chinese classical gardens

every part is rhythmic in expression. The winding walks, the round gates, the zigzag paths, the melody-like walls, the rockeries which are frozen music in themselves, and flowers and trees and birds are all echoes and counterpoints in the rhythm. The Chinese in the garden shares this life-flow at every moment and every turn. As he enters the gate of the garden, his body and his soul alike immediately flow with this stream. . . . Man and nature together move on. (Chan, 2012, pp. 31-32)

The whole worldview of the Chinese people is reflected in the garden: the rhythm of the cosmic flow, the polar relation of *yin* and *yang*, and also the five elements of the tradition, with earth represented by hills, water by ponds, fire by flowers, wood by trees and metal by stones (Chan, 2012, p. 36). While not being explicitly considered a religious space, the garden embodies better than any other architecture the complex cosmology of the Chinese civilization. It is a truly spiritual place where humans can become one with Nature.

5.2 NATURAL HARMONY

In the course of history, Western civilizations have developed philosophies, religions, forms of art and architecture devoted to the quest for Truth and Freedom. These are fundamental values that will not be questioned by this research: what this thesis argues is that, faced with the ecological and ideological crisis of today, it is necessary to integrate them with the Chinese ideal of Harmony, achieving a synthesis that could heal the deep fracture that has been created in the West, separating subject and object, humans and Nature. The present section of this research, as well as the following ones, proposes a series of reflections about the lessons of Chinese classical gardens and how they could be translated into principles and strategies that could be adopted in realizing contemporary architectural and urban projects. In order to do so, three aspects of the concept of Harmony – closely related with each other – will be considered: natural harmony, social harmony, and interior harmony.

This section will tackle the first of them. Firstly, the problem of anthropocentrism will be discussed: Chinese classical gardens propose a model that is nonanthropocentric, yet assign to human beings the key role of maintaining the balance of the whole system. This model is based on relationships of cooperation and solidarity, in which technology can have a positive impact as long as it is not used to dominate and control, but rather to enhance, improve, give life. The key for achieving this lies in understanding that following the techno-scientific ideal of “efficiency” is not necessarily always the best choice, and that humans should instead strive to establish an emotional connection with Nature. To do so, it is essential to learn the importance of uselessness, of caring for all creatures and things without expecting anything in return.

Translating these ideas into contemporary architecture is not easy, but the last paragraph of this section will try to outline some tendencies in modern and contemporary design that go in the direction of natural harmony: the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, the “eco-effectiveness” paradigm proposed by Michael Braungart and William McDonough, the “house with plants” designed by Junya Ishigami, the “Vegetecture” advocated by Maurizio Corrado, and the “Permarchitecture” conceived by Marko Brajovic.

5.2.1 An alternative to anthropocentrism

In the current debate on the relationship between humans and Nature, one of the most controversial and discussed issues is that of anthropocentrism. This word indicates the belief that humans are the most important beings in the world, and that everything should be

interpreted and judged according to human values and principles. This belief, deeply rooted in Christian doctrine as well as in the scientific method, informs every aspect of contemporary culture, mindset, daily life, and architecture. In order to overcome the ecological and ideological crisis, it is crucial to find an alternative paradigm. Therefore, the question is: is the Chinese classical garden an anthropocentric space? If not, what alternative model does it propose?

To answer this, one should bear in mind that the design of gardens was heavily influenced by the Daoist tradition, which several scholars define as “nonanthropocentric.” This idea is defended for example by David L. Hall (1987, p. 171), Po-Keung Ip (1983, p. 339), and Sam Mickey, who defines Daoism as “unequivocally nonanthropocentric,” as it promotes a spontaneous way of relating to other living beings, rather than a utilitarian approach (2019, p. 5). Daoists, in fact, do not consider humans as the highest beings in a natural hierarchy, but just as one of the myriad creatures, one of the multiple manifestations of the Dao.

What Daoist thought proposes, however, does not consist in a biocentric perspective, in which every individual living being has intrinsic value, nor results in an ecocentric approach, where value lays in the health and beauty of ecosystems. According to the Daoist worldview, human beings still play a “special role,” as they are in charge of nourishing other creatures so that they can fully express their true essence, thus ensuring the general harmony and balance of the universe. Yet, how can human beings really know what is best for the Universe? Don’t they have a biased perspective that makes them act only in the interest of their own species? How can Daoism really be nonanthropocentric if it ends up giving such a huge responsibility to humans?

The answer to these questions lies in the following lines from the *Dao De Jing*:

[H]e who values the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire.
He who loves the world as his body may be entrusted with the empire. (Chan, 1963, ch. 13)

According to the contemporary scientific mindset, human beings are the only entities that possess subjectivity, thus having the capacity of understanding and taking decisions, while Nature is an array of objects that passively follow predetermined laws. The Daoist perspective is just the opposite: the Dao is “the ultimate ground of subjectivity” (Miller, 2017, p. 32), and everything that exists follows it. Therefore, the subjectivity of humans is not something that makes them different or “special”: on the contrary, subjectivity emerges from Nature and is precisely what allows human beings to understand and empathize with other creatures and with the universe as a whole. This is the meaning of the lines quoted

above: if both the human body and the rest of the world are Dao, thus originating from the same subjectivity, then when a person values and loves his own body, that person is also capable of valuing and loving the universe. Philosophers Richard Sylvan (1935-1996) and David Bennett explain that

What is offered in Taoism [Daoism] is . . . a doctrine of identification. . . . Egoism, for instance, involves discounting all but oneself; humanism all but humans, and requires a species solidarity with human beings. But wider identification puts a stop to such discounting and to such class-restricted solidarity. For wider identification reveals that interests, desires, values and so forth, are not individual or class restricted. (1988, p. 155)

When one is truly capable of identifying with the whole, he achieves, according to American philosopher John P. Clark,

an impartiality that allows one to respect all beings and value their various goods. . . . The person who comprehends Dao is able to take the perspective of the other, and to overcome the egoism which treats the good of each as antagonistic to that of the other. (1983)

The Chinese classical garden thus proposes identification as the alternative to anthropocentrism. It encourages humans to look at Nature not only from their own point of view, but also from that of rocks, water, clouds, plants, animals. In the *Guan Shui Xuan Ji* (“Record of the Pavilion for Viewing the Water”), scholar Shao Bao (1460-1527) reported a conversation with a guest who was visiting his boat, that he had called a “pavilion.” The guest asked him:

Is what you call “viewing” a looking at the depth of the water in order to wade through it, a looking at the direction of the current in order to cross it, or a looking at the clarity or muddiness of the water in order to wash yourself in it? (as cited in Fung, 2002, pp. 165-166)

But Shao Bao answered by rejecting the anthropocentric point of view of the guest:

These are all looking from the vantage point of humans, and not a great view, for a great view would contemplate Heaven from the vantage point of Heaven. It would focus on the flow of the water, the waves of the water, and the swell of the water and only then would the Way be brought into view. For the flow of the water can be used to show its body; the waves can be used to show its original [force], and the swells can be used to show its patterning. Are these not all great views of the world? (p. 166)

This answer clearly states that humans can merge with the cosmic flow only when they abandon their anthropocentric perspective in their encounter with Nature, identifying

themselves with Heaven and with the whole universe.

5.2.2 Cooperation and solidarity

It has been demonstrated that the Chinese classical garden proposes a worldview in which humans are encouraged to identify with Nature, but it is important to point out that this does not mean that they lose their identity. On the contrary, humans are assigned with a pivotal role in the cosmic balance. They are in fact the only creatures that have “the abilities to recognize, follow and identify with the *dao*” and that hold the “responsibility to help keep the world in good order – to ‘bring the world into harmony’” (D. E. Cooper, 2018a). A “harmony” that John P. Clark defines as a

holistic view of reality in which the whole (whether nature, the earth, society or the person) is looked upon as a unity-in-diversity or unity-in difference, and in which the development or fulfillment of the part is seen to depend on its complex interrelationship with and unfolding within that larger whole. (1983)

The paradigm of domination of human beings over Nature is substituted with an ideal of cooperation and solidarity, that becomes possible only when humans realize that the multiplicity perceived in the world resolves itself in an underlying oneness, and at the same time recognize and gives value to individual differences. The Chinese classical garden, in fact, while reflecting a general harmony, “is not in any sense ‘organic,’ since manyness, diversity, and particularity are maintained” (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 179). Like an ecosystem, the garden is a delicate balance where each element has to fulfill a role in order to ensure the well-being of the whole and the happiness of both itself and the others. Each creature is interconnected with the other ones through symbiotic relationships that are beneficial for all the individuals involved. Domination becomes no longer necessary once that each living and non-living being is allowed to express its true essence and follow the Dao, and the spontaneous interrelationships with each other become based on solidarity. This clearly emerges when one understands that the beauty of the Chinese classical garden does not depend only on the wisdom and work of humans, but also on the cooperation of Nature, as the behavior of the sun, weather, plants and animals can make a great difference.

5.2.3 The role of technology

Technology is one of the main ways through which humans interact with the world around them. According to Martin Heidegger, technology has two definitions, that are related with each other: it is “a means to an end” and “a human activity” (1954/1977, p. 4). In fact, defining ends and devising means to achieve them is a human prerogative. To put it in

Daoist terms, it could be said that technology is part of the true nature of human beings, an expression of their *ziran*, their “self-so-ness,” one of the main ways in which they express themselves and interact with Nature. This is reflected by the importance of alchemy in the Daoist tradition, a quest for transformation (of a person’s life, of natural elements, of the world) that could even be compared with contemporary researches on genetic engineering and artificial intelligence (Miller, 2005, p. 121). The Chinese classical garden is itself a great display of different forms of technology: architecture, gardening, engineering.

However, in classic Daoist texts, technology is often mentioned with ambiguity and suspicion. For example, in the eightieth chapter of the *Dao De Jing*, an ideal society is described, where people conduct simple lives without the need for advanced technologies:

Even though they have boats and carriages, there is no place to take advantage of them.

Even though they have armor and weapons, there is no place to display them. (2015, ch. 80)

Besides, in the tenth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, there is a strong criticism of sophisticated traps to catch animals, birds or fish, claiming that they bring about confusion and disrupt the natural order (1889, ch. 10).

Nonetheless, what is rejected in these two passages is not technology as such, but the forms of technology that are used for purposes of power, domination, control, both of Nature and society. Instead, the Daoist approach towards technology can be traced back to the concept of *wu wei*, described in paragraph 5.1.5: acting in accordance with Nature. This means that one should observe the situation and use appropriate technology or, as explained by American philosopher J. Baird Callicott, “technology that blends with and harnesses natural forces, as opposed to technology that resists and attempts to dominate and reorganize nature” (1994, p. 11). Human beings should use their natural ingenuity not to become the tyrants of the world, but to be the “gardeners of the cosmos” (Miller, 2005, pp. 45-46). Again, the garden is a positive model: humans should treat Nature how a gardener treats a garden: he nourishes it, responds to its needs and refrains from forcing and rushing anything. In other words, he establishes an emotional relationship with it.

Heidegger laments that nowadays society has lost such emotional relationship with Nature, and sees the environment just as “a coherence of forces calculable in advance” and a “storehouse of the standing energy reserve” (1954/1977, p. 21). In other words, Nature is considered as an object that, thanks to science, can be exploited as efficiently as possible. This view is strongly criticized in the twelfth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, that narrates the story of Zigong, a disciple of Confucius:

[Zigong] saw an old man engaged in making a ditch to connect his vegetable garden with a well . . . – great labour with very little result.

“If you had a machine here,” cried Tzū Kung [Zigong], “in a day you could irrigate a hundred times your present area. . . . Would you not like to have one?” . . .

Thereupon the gardener flushed up and said, “I have heard from my teacher that those who have cunning implements are cunning in their dealings, and that those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts, and that those who have cunning in their hearts cannot be pure and incorrupt, and that those who are not pure and incorrupt are restless in spirit, and that those who are restless in spirit are not fit vehicles for Tao [Dao]. It is not that I do not know of these things. I should be ashamed to use them.” (1889, ch. 12)

Later, answering a question posed by one of his disciples, Zigong reflects on his encounter with the old man:

The minimum of effort with the maximum of success, – such is the way of the Sage. Not so this manner of man. Aiming at Tao [Dao], he perfects his virtue. By perfecting his virtue he perfects his body, and by perfecting his body he perfects his spiritual part. And the perfection of the spiritual part is the Tao [Dao] of the Sage. . . . How complete is his purity? Success, profit, skill, – these have no place in his heart. Such a man, if he does not will it, he does not stir; if he does not wish it, he does not act. . . . He may be called a man of perfect virtue. (ch. 12)

While efficiency is becoming one of the fundamental values of contemporary society, the *Zhuangzi* argues that an efficient technology is not necessarily a good one. When judging a new form of technology, humans should not just strive for technical optimization, but they should also ask themselves if it actually enhances the true essence of all living beings, if it makes the world more harmonious, if it’s a vehicle for spiritual elevation. The Chinese classical garden, in fact, can sometimes be deeply inefficient: for example, even if the shortest way between two places should be a straight line, the paths that go through it are usually twirling and zigzagging. They force the visitor to move slowly and take longer to arrive to his destination, but they also offer him a much deeper aesthetic, emotional and spiritual experience. If one manages to understand that efficiency is not always intrinsically good, maybe he will discover that sometimes uselessness can be more valuable than usefulness.

5.2.4 The value of uselessness

According to Sam Mickey, trees and flowers can teach a lot about uselessness. The American theologian, in fact, argues that an ethical approach towards plants should not be based on the fact that they are a resource for humans (instrumental value), or that they are living beings (intrinsic value), or that they are useful for the ecosystem (systemic value):

What do I love when I love a plant? That is what I love: a plant as an open question, a mystery. . . . A plant is itself, which is distinct from any use, reason or system that would ascribe value to the plant. Simply itself, a plant is useless. (2019, p. 2)

The importance of uselessness is also stressed in the Daoist story of Woodworker Shi, narrated in the *Zhuangzi*:

Woodworker Shi . . . saw an oak planted as the village altar tree. It was so huge that a herd of several thousand cattle could have stood in its shade – its trunk was a hundred arm-spans round, tall as the hills, and a hundred feet straight up to the lowest limb. . . . but the woodworker did not so much as glance at it and walked right past without stopping. . . . “It’s waste wood! Make a boat from it and it will sink; make a coffin from it and it will rot; . . . it’s useless! That is why it has lived to such an age.” After Woodworker Shi returned home, the altar oak appeared to him in a dream. “What were you comparing me to? Did you mean to compare me to those lovely trees, like the sour cherry and pear, the tangerine and pomelo – fruit bearing trees that are ripped apart once their fruit ripens? Disgraced by all that ripping, their limbs split and their branches torn, they find only bitterness in life and end by dying before their natural years are up. They bring it on themselves, being torn up by the common crowd. It is thus for all types of things. Now, I have sought to be useless for a very long time, and though I came close to death I have now reached my goal – for me that is of great use indeed! Were I useful could I ever have grown so big?” . . . Men all know the utility of usefulness, but none knows the utility of uselessness! (2019, ch. 4)

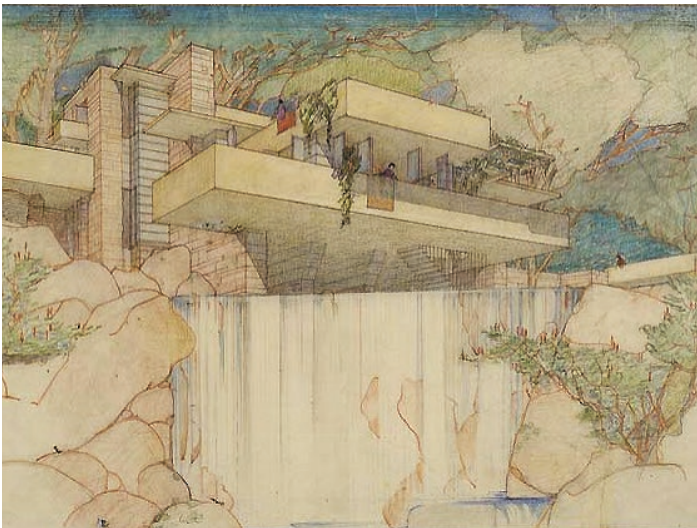
Uselessness is the key that allows to overcome the current mindset of domination and exploitation of Nature: true affection, a true emotional relationship with Nature is possible only when one acts free from self-interest and moral obligations. It is what Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) defined as a “godly diversion”: an act of appreciation that does not have a particular reason, such as looking at the stars in the sky (1847/1958, p. 233). Chinese classical gardens have always been ideal places for “godly diversions,” with their terraces for looking at the moon, courtyards for appreciating flowers, ponds for contemplating fish. When wondering through a garden, the visitor is led to enjoy the beauty of Nature in a spontaneous and selfless way, to appreciate even tiny, insignificant details, to empathize with the elements and creatures around him. As pointed out by Stanislaus Fung in his analysis of the “Yuan shuo” chapter of the *Yuan Ye*, one of the main purposes of gardens is to evoke emotions and sentiments: “feeling enchanted, encountering an impression of the equivocation of the artificial and the natural in a designed landscape, worries dispelled after drinking, feeling removed from the mundane dusty world” (2002, p. 192). Moreover, since ancient times the Chinese people have considered plants as capable of experiencing feelings and responding to the care and love of humans, with which they could



■ Fig. 5.2.a Waterfall on the Bear Run before the construction of Fallingwater.



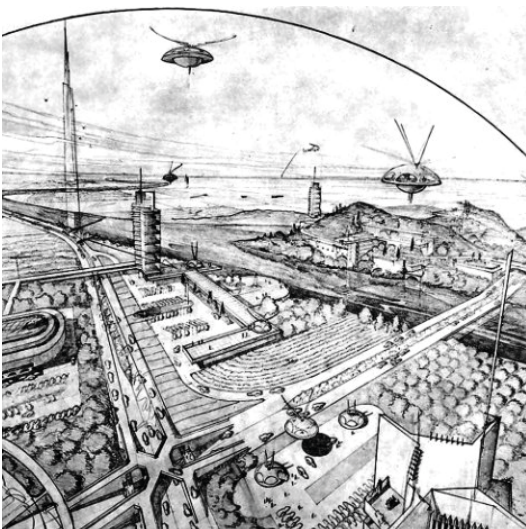
■ Fig. 5.2.b Frank Lloyd Wright, Fallingwater, 1934-1937, Mill Run, Pennsylvania.



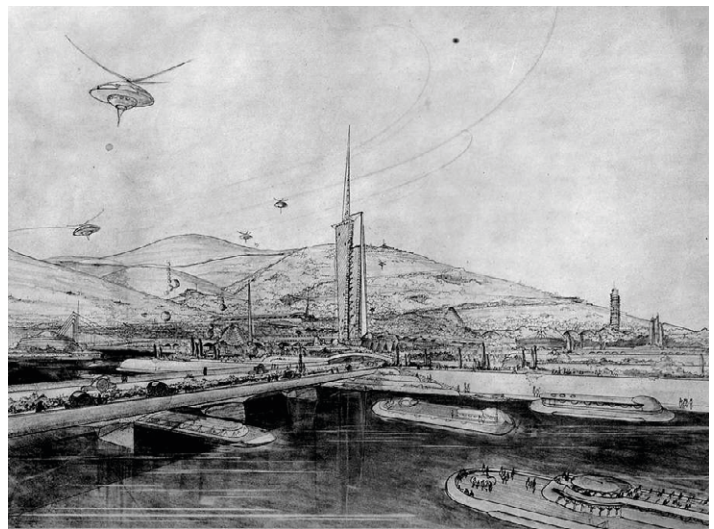
■ Fig. 5.2.c Frank Lloyd Wright, drawing of Fallingwater.



■ Fig. 5.2.d Frank Lloyd Wright, model of Broadacre City, 1935.



■ Fig. 5.2.e Frank Lloyd Wright, view of Broadacre City.



■ Fig. 5.2.f Frank Lloyd Wright, view of Broadacre City.

develop real intimate relationships (J. Cooper, 1977).

In conclusion, uselessness, empathy, and love towards all creatures are some of the antidotes that Chinese classical gardens bring forth in order to counter today's excessively rational, scientific worldview that sees Nature only as an exploitable reserve.

5.2.5 Towards an architecture of natural harmony

The Chinese classical garden teaches that natural harmony can be achieved by creating nonanthropocentric spaces where each element can express its true essence and establish relationships based on cooperation, solidarity, empathy and love with the other elements and creatures. This approach is radically different from the current modern mindset, founded on the techno-scientific ideal of efficiency, that considers as its main goal the empowerment of technology, which has already become an end in itself.

The question now is how to introduce in the currently dominant paradigm new strategies that can subvert it and guide it towards the ideal of natural harmony proposed by Chinese classical gardens. To answer that, one can start by taking a look at some interesting approaches and ideas that have been gradually emerging and taking shape in the architecture of the last century.

One of the first modern designers who strived to achieve a deep harmony with Nature was American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), who developed a philosophy called "organic architecture." He was profoundly influenced by Eastern culture and architecture, and he understood that the Chinese and Japanese traditions could provide new answers for the problems of modernity:

This new sense-of-the-within naturally unfolding, taking form by the culture of art, architecture, philosophy, and religion, natural; all being content to look within to the Spirit for the solution of every human problem and, by expanding the means so found, enlarging and achieving new, varied expressions of life on earth – this would be old wisdom, ancient as Lao-tze [Lao Zi] at least; yet modern. (1958/1970a, p. 29)

For Wright, making organic architecture meant designing not *against* Nature, but *for* Nature. It meant that humans would become "a noble feature worthy of [their] own ground; integral there, as trees, streams, or the rock ribs that are the hills" (1958/1970a, p. 66). In his buildings, he recognized the features, the strengths, the *ziran* of each material that he used, and glorified them. As he said, his architecture went "back to learn from the natural source of all natural things" (1954/1970b, p. 52). An appropriate handling of materials, however, was not Wright's only way of making harmonious works. He was also capable of perfectly understanding the environment in which his buildings would rise, and thanks to

this awareness of the context, he could design them so that they actually made the place more beautiful than it was before.

A magnificent example of this is Fallingwater, built between 1934 and 1937 along the Bear Run, in Pennsylvania, and considered one of Wright's masterpieces (figs. 5.2.a-c). The house, that seems to have grown spontaneously from the rocks, has transformed an anonymous waterfall in the middle of the forest into one of the most beautiful landscapes in America, in a harmonious encounter between human artifice and natural environment. This architecture expresses Wright's ideal of a free life in the middle of Nature. Its interior spaces welcomed the abundant light that came from outside, filtered by the dense foliage of the surrounding trees, and the murmuring sound of the waterfall. At the same time, the large concrete terraces, that constituted almost half of the total surface of the house, invited the inhabitants to spend their time outdoors, enjoying the scenery. Edgar Kaufmann Jr. (1910-1989), son of Wright's client who commissioned the construction of Fallingwater, wrote:

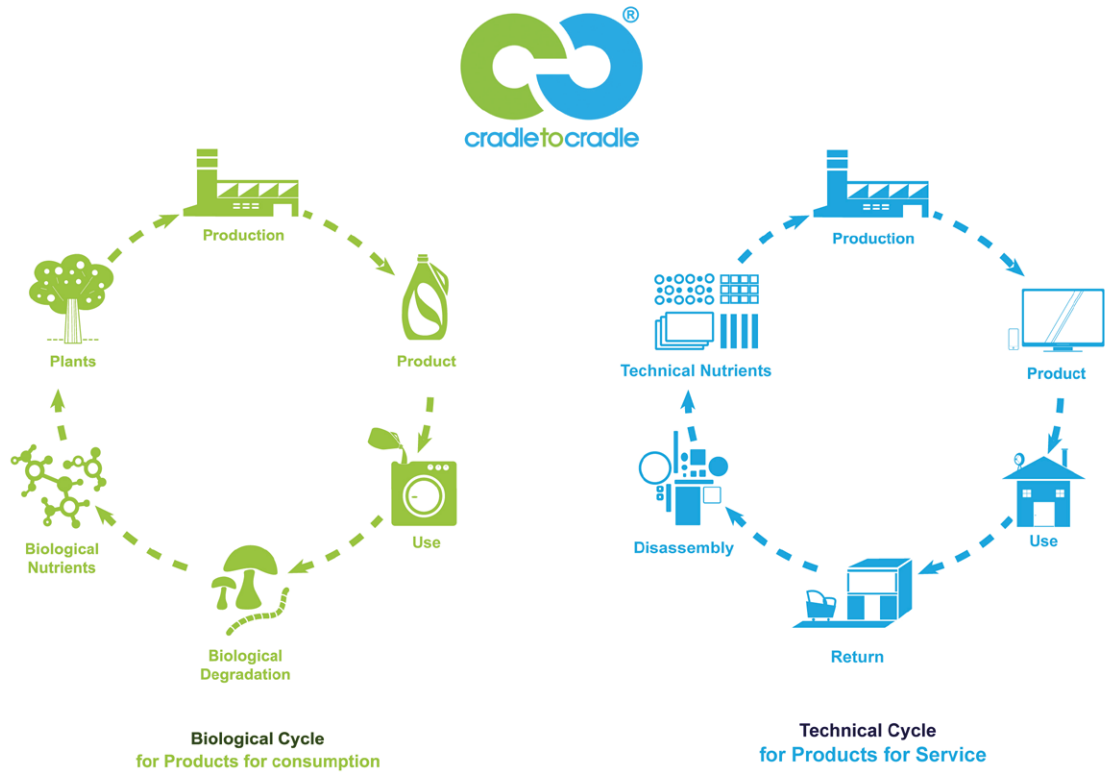
Its beauty remains fresh like that of the nature into which it fits. It has served well as a home, yet has always been more than that: a work of art, beyond any measures of excellence. Itself an ever-flowing source of exhilaration, it is set on the waterfall of Bear Run, spouting nature's endless energy and grace. House and site together form the very image of man's desire to be at one with nature, equal and wedded to nature. (as cited in Fallingwater, n.d.)

On the urban scale, Wright developed a utopia that he called "Broadacre City" (figs. 5.2.d-f). It consisted in a model for a decentralized community, where the separation between city and countryside was blurred, if not totally absent. Wright conceived a large grid that gave shape to the land and, inside it, agricultural fields were alternated with single-family houses with gardens, but also with skyscrapers of complex shapes and textures, community centers, theaters, schools and cathedrals. Broadacre City welcomed modern technologies, such as cars and helicopters, as they allowed people to move freely throughout the territory, thus making this utopia possible. It was not technology that gave shape to the city: on the contrary, technology was just a means through which it became possible to achieve Wright's ideal of a society of free individuals in harmony with the natural environment.

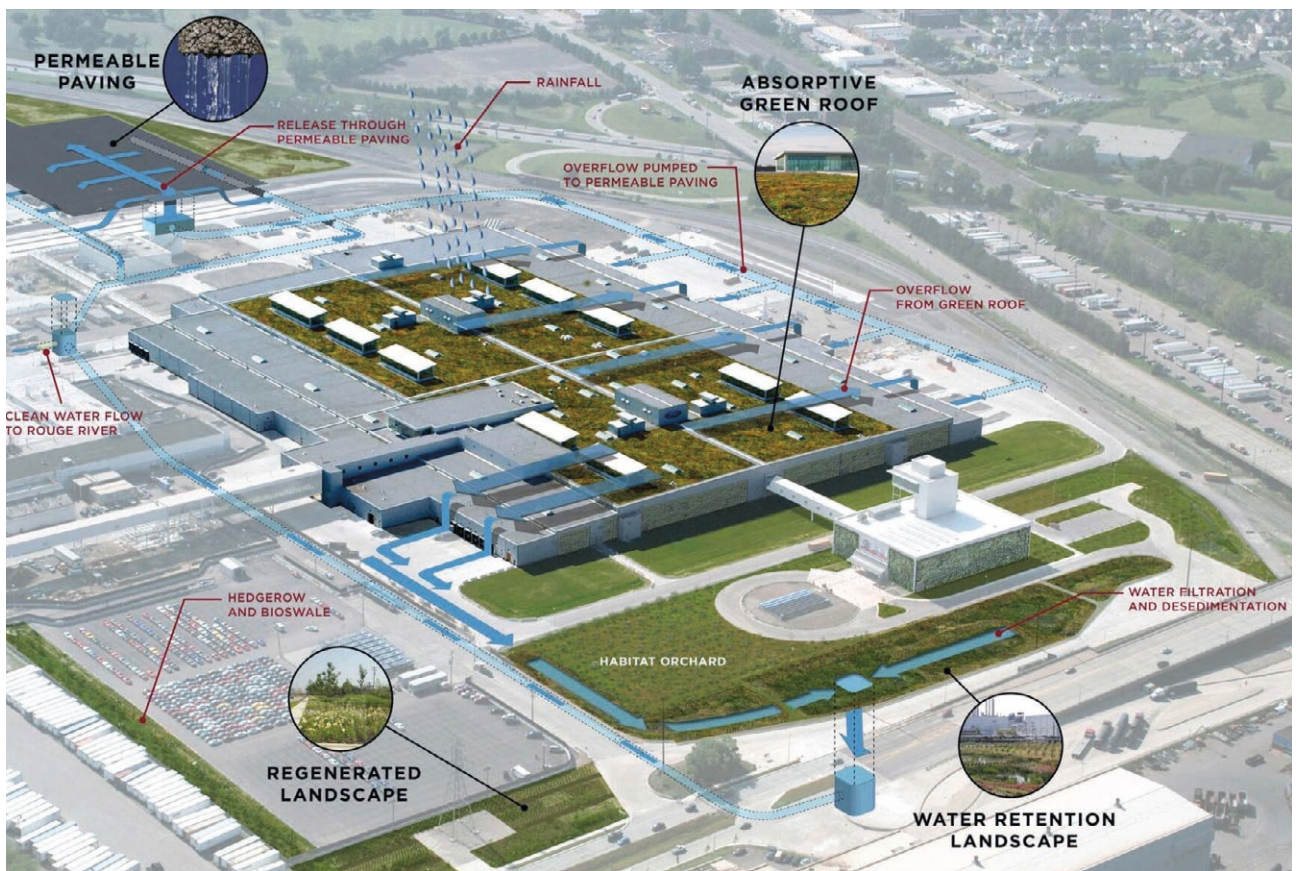
However, despite Wright being one of the fathers of Modern Architecture, in the following decades his idea of natural harmony was forgotten, and the spread of modernity around the world was accompanied by the destruction of the environment and the landscape. Since the birth of the environmentalist movement, in the second half of the 20th century, a greater awareness about these issues has started to spread, and more and more architects have

begun to adopt strategies that reduce the negative impact of the buildings on the environment: energy efficiency (reducing the energy needs of buildings and increasing their ability to capture or generate their own energy), water efficiency (reducing water consumption), materials efficiency (using renewable or recycled materials), waste reduction (reducing waste of energy, water and materials) and Life Cycle Assessment (assessing a full range of impacts associated with all cradle-to-grave stages of a process, from extraction of raw materials to disposal or recycling). All these principles and techniques can be considered part of the general paradigm of “eco-efficiency.” In their book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, German chemist Michael Braungart (b. 1958) and American architect William McDonough (b. 1951) explain that the key words of this paradigm are “Reducing, Reusing, Recycling and Regulating”: this approach aims at *limiting* damages, *reducing* waste, *minimizing* negative impacts (2002/2009, p. 53). It aims at being “less bad” than what was done in the past: obviously, this cannot be the answer. According to Braungart and McDonough, solutions cannot be found as long as one keeps operating inside the very system that caused the problems in the first place (p. 62). What they propose, instead, is a different approach, that they call “eco-effectiveness,” and that, in their intentions, should promote “a world of abundance, not one of limits, pollution, and waste” (p. 91). In describing what an eco-effective building would be like, Braungart and McDonough compare it to a cherry tree. At first glance, the tree looks inefficient and wasteful, because of all the blossoms that fall and litter the ground around the plant. But the blossoms and fruits in excess actually nourish a variety of microorganisms, plants and animals (pp. 72-73). Just like in a Chinese classical garden, each element is meant to nourish and enhance other creatures and things, to create an image of beauty, abundance, happiness.

But how do Braungart and McDonough propose to translate these ideas into actual buildings? First of all, they argue, by establishing a relationship of continuity between exterior and interior spaces. The insistence on energy efficiency that is affecting contemporary projects is making them more and more insulated and isolated from their environment, while in Chinese classical gardens exterior and interior are almost completely blended. An architecture of harmony means that people should live outside as much as they live inside. Light should pour into their rooms, and beautiful views and sceneries should always be available. It should be possible to open the windows, and each inhabitant should be able to control the temperature of his personal area through air flows. Parts of the exterior spaces should be sheltered from sunlight and rain, just like the covered pathways and galleries of Chinese classical gardens, so that people can enjoy different weathers. In this regard, it is worth noting that François Jullien advocates a similar idea when, in the eighth chapter of *Vivre*



■ Fig. 5.2.g The biological cycle and the technical cycle according to the eco-effectiveness paradigm proposed by Braungart and McDonough.



■ Fig. 5.2.h William McDonough, Ford Truck Plant, 2003, Dearborne, Michigan.

de Paysage, praises the kiosks (*tíng*, 亭) of Chinese traditional architecture, as there are the place where, more than everywhere else, the separation between subject and object, human and natural, is deleted. In them, one is at the same time inside and outside, exposed and sheltered: there, one loses track of time and feels a “connivance” with Nature (2014/2017, pp. 138-141).

Secondly, Braungart and McDonough suggest that architecture should participate to the cycle of seasons. It should celebrate the character of each part of the year: the hot rays of sun in the summer, the melancholic sound of rain in autumn, the ice and snow that transfigure the landscape in winter, the sweet scent of flowers in spring. Through the adoption of bioclimatic strategies, renewable energy sources and natural ventilation systems, the comfort of the inhabitants and users of the building should be always guaranteed. Vegetation should be arranged so that it creates pleasant sceneries throughout the whole year. Again, it seems quite clear that also this point demonstrates strong consonances with the features of Chinese classical gardens.

Thirdly, buildings should be designed not only for the needs of humans, but also those of animals and plants. Spaces should welcome biodiversity and allow each species to express its inner nature or, in other words, its *ziran*, re-establishing a long-lost harmony described in the ninth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

then man dwelt with birds and beasts, and all creation was one. (1889, ch. 9)

Vegetation could be put in gardens, terraces, balconies, walls and roofs, generating a favorable environment for birds and insects; ponds and pools could contain fish and tortoises. By living side by side with other creatures, humans would develop feelings of love, empathy and compassion towards them.

Fourthly, buildings should be made of materials that do not generate waste: either because they can be “upcycled” (that means being recycled or reused without losing their quality) and thus become “technical nutrients,” or because they could re-enter the environment and thus become “biological nutrients” (Braungart & McDonough, 2002/2009, pp. 92-117; fig. 5.2.g).

Braungart and McDonough then explain the the green roof can be considered a good example of eco-effective architecture, as it respects many of the principles mentioned above: it attracts birds and insects, absorbs water from precipitations, ensures thermal insulation, protects from ultraviolet sunrays, and produces oxygen. Moreover, it can be designed so that it can also welcome people, that would thus enjoy its vegetation and animals, as well as the weather and seasons. To sum up, the green roof exemplifies an approach of collabo-



■ Fig. 5.2.i Jun'ya Ishigami, House with Plants, 2009-2012, Tokyo, elevation.



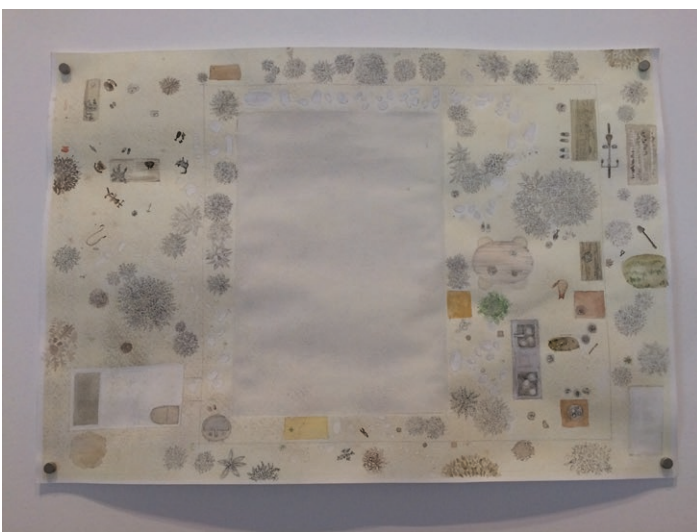
■ Fig. 5.2.j House with Plants, dining room.



■ Fig. 5.2.k House with Plants, view of the dining room from the upper floor.



■ Fig. 5.2.l House with Plants, section.



■ Fig. 5.2.m House with Plants, plan of the ground floor.



■ Fig. 5.2.n House with Plants, wardrobe surrounded by vegetation.

ration and symbiosis with Nature similar to the Daoist one.

One of the eco-effective strategies that has been gaining a great popularity in recent years is the integration of architecture and plants. One of the most famous examples is the concept of “Vertical Forest” devised by Italian architect Stefano Boeri (b. 1956) and first applied in a pair of residential towers built in Milan between 2009 and 2014, and later exported all over the world.

A less-known – yet extremely interesting – case is that of the “House with Plants” designed by Japanese architect Jun’ya Ishigami (b. 1974) and built in Tokyo between 2009 and 2012 (figs. 5.2.i-n). Here the relationship between interior and exterior has been reverted, and the architect has brought Nature right inside the house, with a sort of “forest” growing within the double height volume of the living room. This way, the inhabitants can live in a natural environment even though the building is located in a monotonous urban context: a “microcosm of nature” is inserted “into the deeply artificial environment of the city” (House for a Young Couple, 2021). Ishigami explains that for him architecture should no longer think in terms of an “interior” that is separate from exterior space:

For me, everything is landscape. I don’t believe in one of the most traditional views of architecture, that finds its primary role in the delimitation of an interior as opposed to the *continuum* of exterior space. This interpretation is based on the wrong assumption that architecture should necessarily be capable of creating in its interiors a more comfortable “environment” for life. On the contrary, I get my inspiration from the landscape to create new exterior environments inside the buildings. (Benetti, 2016)

For the Japanese architect, this means also that interior spaces should convey to their inhabitants multisensorial feelings similar to those that one can experience in a natural setting:

I am interested in recreating in the interior environment the same, subtle variations that characterize exterior space. Very often we feel good outdoors, also because we can experiment ceaseless, light, “natural” modifications of the parameters that define our physiological and psychological comfort; temperature and humidity, for example. (Benetti, 2016)

Moreover, the interior garden of the House with Plants has another effect on the relationship between the building and its inhabitants, giving them the power to transform their home by deciding which new plants to grow. This way, a close emotional relationship is established between individuals and their own dwelling as well as, of course, their plants. In this project, Jun’ya Ishigami has managed to replicate the idea of natural harmony typical of Chinese classical gardens and condense it in a much smaller space without losing any of



Fig. 5.2.o Sanfte Strukturen, Weidenkathedrale, 2003, Rostock, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.



Fig. 5.2.p Chiangmai Life Construction, Bamboo Sports Hall, 2017, Chiang Mai.



Fig. 5.2.q Canyaviva, Casa de Laila, 2013, Alhaurín El Grande, Andalusia.



Fig. 5.2.r Guinée Potin Architectes, Centre de découverte, de culture scientifique et de recherche, 2014, La Roche-sur-Yon, Pays de la Loire.



Fig. 5.2.s Weddle Gilmore Black Rock Studio, Gateway to McDowell Sonoran Preserve, 2002, Scottsdale, Arizona.

its fundamental features. Just like the owners of the Master of Nets Garden, the inhabitants of the House with Plants can live inside a beautiful natural scenery, enjoying the beauty of the vegetation throughout the four seasons, taking care of their trees and flowers, and establishing an emotional relationship with them.

An even more radical approach is the one advocated by Italian architect Maurizio Corrado (b. 1958) in his book *Architettura del dopo. Costruire con le piante* (2020; the title can be translated as “Architectures of the After. Building with Plants”). In fact, he argues that plants should not only integrate architecture, but also be the very substance of which buildings are made. In his book, he shows how traditional building techniques based on vegetal materials can be reinterpreted in contemporary ways and used to realize a variety of structures, ensuring unmatched levels of sustainability, eco-compatibility, and social cohesion (p. 10). It is “another way to look at architecture that could be defined *Vegetecture*” (p. 71). Like Ishigami, Corrado stresses the importance of blurring the separation between interior and exterior:

Starting from our biological needs, having a body that is meant to stay outdoors and in movement, one can start working on the idea of *building exteriors*. One of the fundamental elements of the exterior are surely plants. Enhancing their presence brings not only material benefits, but also connects us immediately to the environment that has been ours for millions of years, acting directly on the deepest parts of our being. . . . The true step forward is to give interiors the chance of containing the exterior. Mind you, I am not talking of integration of architecture in nature, I am not talking of Wright’s Fallingwater, I am not talking of large windows that frame forests and landscapes by keeping them at distance. I am saying that our body should experience the feeling of staying in a place like those in which it has spent the past millennia. (p. 71)

Throughout the book, Corrado describes several projects and building techniques: pavilions that have been created with living willows in parks around Germany (pp. 85-113; fig. 5.2.o); complex structures made of cane through the “Canyaviva method,” a technique inspired by ancient Mesopotamian architecture (pp. 115-131; fig. 5.2.q); houses, schools and large public facilities built with bamboo (pp. 133-152; fig. 5.2.p); buildings with walls made of straw, an ecological material that not only has great thermal insulation properties, but that is also ideal for creating earthquake-resistant structures (pp. 153-178; fig. 5.2.r); houses, schools and other constructions made of raw earth (pp. 179-208; fig. 5.2.s), which “was and is the most widespread building material, the one that guarantees the best performances (thermal, hygrometric, static and perceptive) and has the highest number of technical applications” (p. 200).

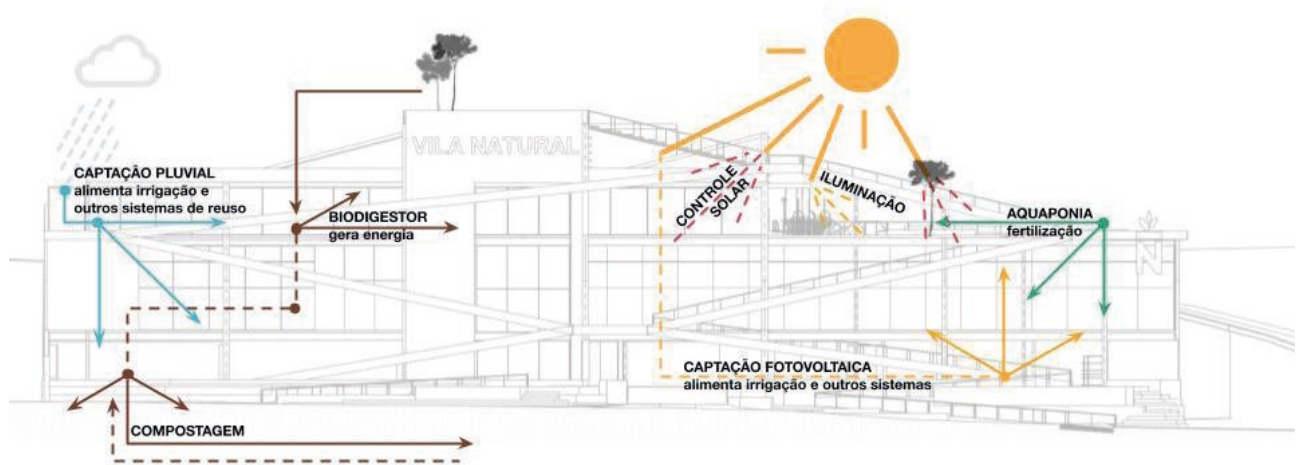
Besides their sustainability, another good reason to adopt these materials and tech-



■ Fig. 5.2.t Atelier Marko Brajovic, view of São Paulo in 2030.



■ Fig. 5.2.u Atelier Marko Brajovic, view of Rio Pinheiros, São Paulo, in 2030.



■ Fig. 5.2.v Marko Brajovic, Vila da Terra Farmer's Market, 2019, São Paulo, diagram of the metabolism of the building.



■ Fig. 5.2.w Vila da Terra Farmer's Market, space for courses and workshops.



■ Fig. 5.2.x Vila da Terra Farmer's Market, roof with plants.

niques, argues Corrado, is that they allow humans to establish an intimate connection with their dwellings:

It is important that a part of the house has been modeled by the inhabitants and by their friends with their own hands. This enhances the perception of unity that connects the human being with the place in which he dwells. (p. 181)

When one identifies with his own dwelling, and when that dwelling welcomes and glorifies Nature, then it becomes easier to identify with Nature, to understand that the whole planet is humanity's dwelling.

The final approach that will be discussed in this paragraph is that of "Permarchitecture," a concept developed by Croatian-Brazilian architect Marko Brajovic (b. 1973), inspired by the integration of architecture and permaculture (Brajovic, 2020). Permaculture is a design strategy based on whole system thinking and on the principles and patterns that can be observed in natural ecosystems. Therefore, Permarchitecture consists in results in buildings with a metabolism that merges with that of its environment, creating "an integrated ecosystem of mutual benefits" made of flows of energy, matter and information. According to Brajovic, this approach can be applied also to the urban scale, following the principle of "building as trees and cities as forests". Learning from Nature, it becomes possible to create cooperative cities, where humans, animals and plants live harmoniously together, sharing the urban space and collaborating to make the whole environment better (figs. 5.2.t-u).

Brajovic has experimented the potential of Permarchitecture in his project for the renovation of the Vila da Terra farmers' market, started in 2019 in the Vila Madalena neighbourhood of São Paulo (figs. 5.2.v-x). The building is being readapted in a gradual and organic way, keeping in balance its complex network of dynamic internal and external relations. The goal is to realize a complex organism in which "energy production, food production and consumption, food forest, retail, co-working, [and] school" can work together, as in a harmonious ecosystem (Brajovic, 2020).

Organic architecture, eco-effectivity, houses full of plants, Vegetecture and Permarchitecture: despite their differences, what these paradigms have in common is their powerful drive towards an ideal of natural harmony that resonates with the Daoist principles of Chinese classical gardens. Thanks to these radical ideas, one can dream of a future in which humans will live in symbiosis with Nature, establishing emotional relations of solidarity, cooperation and empathy with all the other creatures, and using technology not to dominate and control, but rather to enhance, regenerate and allow each element of Nature to express their *ziran*.

5.3 SOCIAL HARMONY

According to Chinese thought, there cannot be natural harmony without social harmony. The good functioning of society was the main focus of Confucian scholars who, throughout the centuries, have contributed with their ideas to the rise of a system of rigid hierarchies, bureaucracy, and rituals, reflected by the formal and symmetric architecture that could be found, for example, in the Imperial Palace, but also in the Residential Quarters of the Master of Nets Garden, as explained in section 3.7. For the purposes of this research, however, the Confucian conception of social harmony may not be the most appropriate paradigm to take in consideration. Instead, the Daoist ideal seems much more promising. While it was not the dominant way of conceiving social harmony in traditional China, it was the one that influenced the most the design of gardens, which, as discussed in paragraph 2.4.2, was based on a spatial conception that was opposite to the regularity and symmetry of residences.

In Chinese classical gardens, social harmony was understood as the possibility for the individual to forget rigid social conventions and freely express his own emotions, creativity and imagination. In other words, the garden allowed humans to realize another one of the fundamental aspects of their true nature, of their *ziran*: besides the prerogative of maintaining the harmony of the cosmos by establishing an emotional relationship with other living beings, in the garden one found the possibility of unleashing his creative drives. This was achieved by adopting a spatial conception that responded to three principles: the space was nonhierarchical, interactive and multi-layered. Nonhierarchical, because its irregular and apparently chaotic configuration allowed the individual to escape the conventions of society and enjoy true spiritual freedom. Interactive, because when wandering through the garden or performing activities in it, one would *play* with its elements and share his creativity. Multi-layered, because the imagination of the visitor was constantly stimulated on different levels (multi-sensorial perceptions, symbolic meanings, voids), conveying different feelings and inspirations.

As in the previous section, the last paragraph will be dedicated to exploring some tendencies in modern and contemporary architecture that seem to resonate with the ideal of social harmony promoted by the Chinese classical garden: the reflections of John Ruskin, the “architecture of participation” advocated by Giancarlo De Carlo, the paradigm of flexibility, the self-build techniques proposed by Alejandro Aravena, the “architecture of survival” conceived by Yona Friedman, and the “open source architecture” described by Carlo Ratti.

5.3.1 Nonhierarchical space

While the space of the Italian Renaissance garden is rigidly, geometrically and connotatively defined, that of the Chinese classical garden remains vague, irregular, denotative. In the former, its form is described by borders, while what gives shape to the latter are its centers. In Western culture, the world is seen as a clear set of formal categories, genera, species, while the Chinese see it as “the ten thousand things” (Hall & Ames, 1998, pp. 175-178). It is now clear why a place like the Master of Nets Garden grants to his visitors a much greater freedom and possibility of choice than the Barbarigo Garden, where one is forced to follow a geometrical pre-determined path. The Chinese classical garden is the place where the literati escape from the conventions imposed by society and from their governmental responsibilities. Its design follows the Daoist principle of individual freedom.

The complex and irregular configuration of the Chinese classical garden, studied in section 2.6, can be enjoyed through the act of *yóu* (游), an intricate concept that can be translated as “wandering” or “travelling.” *Yóu* is actually “more a state of mind than a state of physical being” (Mair, 1983, p. 109), a sort of aesthetic experience that one can have both in a garden and in a natural landscape, and that leads to “transcendental spiritual freedom” (Han, 2012, p. 298). It consists in forgetting about one’s self and the surroundings, and merging with the cosmic flow. The Chinese consider it a necessary condition for creating and appreciating art: according to them, creativity and imagination are only possible if the individual is truly free (Han, 2012, pp. 298-299).

5.3.2 Interactive space

According to the *Zhuangzi*, the act of *yóu* can also be performed just by sitting and meditating (Han, 2012, p. 298). Then, one may wonder, what is the point of wandering through a garden if the same spiritual freedom can be attained just by remaining in one’s abode? The difference lies in the fact that, while exploring the garden, one engages in playful movements: he *plays* with the garden and he *is played* by the garden (Han, 2012, p. 299). It is this interactive relationship between visitor and space that gives meaning to the Chinese classical garden:

... a collection of rocks, buildings, ponds and vegetation, does not constitute a garden; only in the act of playing can the garden be said to exist. . . . without players there would be no garden because there would be no performance, no play. (Makeham, 1998, p. 187)

At the same time, interaction between humans and Art (that means gardens, but also

paintings, poetries, music etc.) leads to joyful appreciation of life, that is a fundamental value in Confucian thought. Again, the Chinese classical garden acts as a catalyst for creativity.

The concept of interactivity in the garden can take several different forms:

- Interaction with the physical configuration of space, meaning that the architecture of the garden is flexible, and it can be changed and rearranged based on the needs of its inhabitants, on the activity that one wants to perform, on the weather and season;
- Interaction with art, meaning that during the *yaji*, the “elegant gatherings” of the literati, one would not only look at paintings and calligraphies, but would also touch, smell, hear, taste, play, create different kinds of arts, from music to flower arrangement, from tea appreciation to garden design;
- Interaction with history, meaning that the names and inscriptions positioned in the garden allow the visitor to access the past, and that during the *yaji* one would treat antique works not as untouchable objects to be venerated but as things that can be brought up to date, discussed, commented.

5.3.3 Multi-layered space

A different kind of interaction is the one that affects the mind of the visitor: the garden plays with his perceptions, associations and thoughts, opening up new possibilities for his imagination. This is because, beyond the physical space made of hills, lakes, flowers and pavilions, the garden is also made of multiple intangible layers, that can be defined as “multisensoriality,” “meaning,” and “imagination.”

First of all, multisensoriality. As seen in paragraph 2.6.6, sight is definitely not the only sense to be stimulated in a Chinese classical garden: sounds, smells and tactile perceptions are just as important. The multiplicity of inputs that visitors receive while wandering through the garden or enjoying a particular scenery, allows them to “widen their eyes and broaden their minds” (Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 173). Besides, most of these perceptions change with the weather and season, so that a new dimension is added to the experience of the garden, making it deeper, transforming it from 3D to 4D (S. Zhao, 2017, p. 245).

The following layer, or “fifth dimension,” is that of meaning. Symbolisms, associations and references to famous myths, poems or paintings are “a primary emotional element of the garden form” (Morris, 1983, p. 164) and can be found almost everywhere: sometimes explicitly, as in inscriptions that announce the name of a particular pavilion, and sometimes implicitly, as with the presence of meaningful species of plants.

The last layer, that of imagination, is a consequence of the previous ones. The perceptions and ideas conveyed by the garden lead the visitor to create a personal, subjective,

psychological idea of the place. According to Chinese writer and philosopher Zong Baihua (1897-1986), the idea of space that one gets when wondering through a Chinese classical garden is not based on geometry, but on music and dance (Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 177): it is not a rational, objective experience, but an emotional, subjective one. Multisensoriality can spark synesthetic perceptions: one can hear the sound of raindrops just by looking at lotus flowers in a pond, or feel a cool breeze during a hot summer day just by hearing those same lotuses rustling in the water. The meanings represented by names and symbols are meant to arouse sentiments, reflections, ideas, and this is possible because they convey ambiguous, indefinite messages. Indeed, it is when something is left empty, undefined, that it becomes a fertile soil for human creativity. This is the same mechanism that is found, for example, in Chinese landscape paintings, where large voids are often present: when one looks at them, his mind is stimulated and tries to fill the blank spaces with its imagination. The walls and windows of Chinese classical gardens follow the same principle, awakening creativity and suggesting an idea of infinity, as seen in paragraphs 2.6.7 and 2.6.8. As claimed by Stanislaus Fung, “the appreciation of gardens is clearly shown to involve an imaginative engagement with what is not physically around” (2002, p. 165).

It is thanks to this complexity of layers that the Chinese classical garden has been for centuries one of the main venues for the creation and appreciation of art (Chang & Gao, 2018). The perceptions and ideas suggested by gardens have given to countless painters, poets, calligraphers and musicians the freedom to unleash their natural creativity and imagination, leading to the creation of some of the finest masterpieces ever conceived by humans.

5.3.4 Towards an architecture of social harmony

Today, the dominant worldview is based on the approach of scientists and technicians, that consists in predicting and controlling, rather than on that of the artists, that resides in the acts of celebrating and enjoying (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 180). But creativity is a fundamental part of the human nature, of the *ziran* of the human species, and it should be possible for everyone to freely express it. Only when individuals are put in the condition of taking their fate in their own hands and realize their passions, a real social harmony can be achieved.

In the history of modern architecture, the first who made this kind of reflection was English art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900), who claimed that the decline of freedom started with the Renaissance. In fact, he criticized the loss of freedom of the workmen who, forced to realize a design that was already defined in all its details by the architect, could no longer express themselves. The “ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomi-

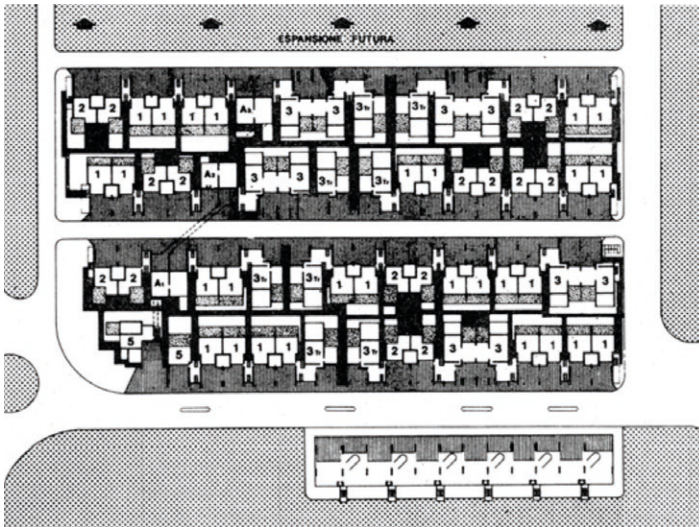


Fig. 5.3.a Giancarlo De Carlo, Villaggio Matteotti, 1969-1975, Terni, Umbria, plan.



Fig. 5.3.b Houses and paths in the Villaggio Matteotti.



Fig. 5.3.c Villaggio Matteotti, a meeting with the future inhabitants.



Fig. 5.3.d Villaggio Matteotti, a meeting with the future inhabitants.

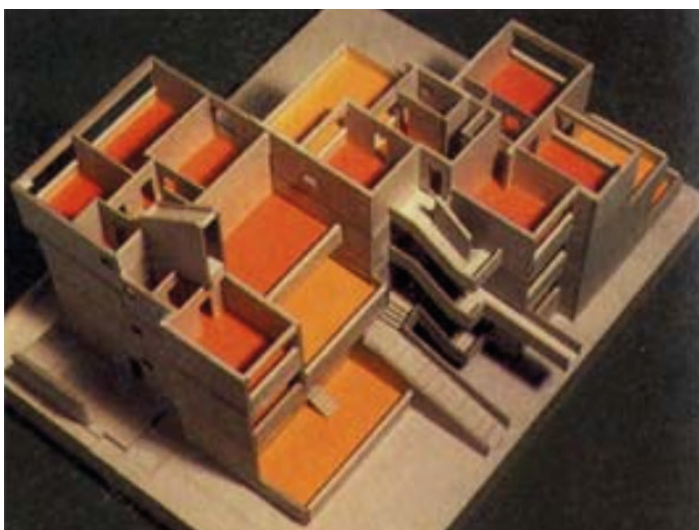


Fig. 5.3.e Villaggio Matteotti, maquette used in the discussions with the future inhabitants.

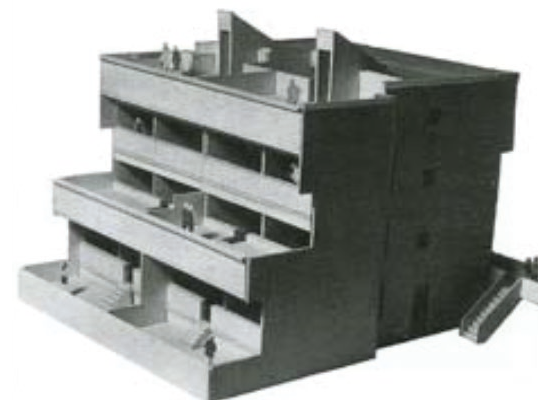


Fig. 5.3.f Villaggio Matteotti, maquette used in the discussions.

less and rigid” that can be found in pre-modern architecture represent the “signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure” (1851/2009, vol. 2, p. 163). Modern workers have been turned into tools, machines, slaves, and the possibility of achieving self-realization has been denied to them, as the value of a person can emerge only when he can “begin to imagine, to think” (p. 162).

More than one century later, Italian architect Giancarlo De Carlo (1919-2005) continued on a similar note. He defined specialization as “a phenomenon of dangerous degeneration” (1972/2013, p. 52), and argued that while in the past even farmers “had a sufficient degree of freedom to creatively express their needs and to choose the appropriate ways for representing themselves and their relationship with nature”, today “the possibility of expressing one’s self . . . has been lost” (p. 55). Autonomy and creativity have been replaced by alienation, standardization, simplification. Specialization increases production and profit, but it does not enhance the creative potential of people.

Like in the pre-modern Europe described by Ruskin and De Carlo, also in traditional China there were no professional, specialized “architects”: as discussed in section 2.3, Chinese classical gardens were the result of a complex interaction between different actors, in which even the ones that were considered “inferior,” such as craftsmen and plantsmen, had a margin of freedom and were allowed to express their creativity. However, after centuries of tremendous technological progress, in which architects have firmly established themselves as an indispensable professional figure, is it possible to go back to the pre-modern paradigm? Does it even make sense?

Starting from the 1960s, some architects have begun to reflect on these issues: not by advocating a return to the past, but by looking for new paradigms that, despite being inspired by the principles of vernacular architecture, were based on the social and technical context of modernity. The new approaches incorporated into the projects concepts such as interactivity, flexibility, modularity, and participation, the main idea being that the individual should no longer passively inhabit space, but rather actively express his creativity.

One of the first examples of this concept was designed by De Carlo himself: the Villaggio Matteotti, a working-class neighborhood designed between 1969 and 1975 in the outskirts of Terni, in central Italy (figs. 5.3.a-b). In this project the architect, together with sociologist Domenico De Masi (b. 1938), experimented a participatory approach, involving the future inhabitants of the buildings through interviews, meetings and exhibitions (figs. 5.3.c-f). He listened to their needs and requests and allowed them to choose between 45 different typologies of dwellings. Each residential unit included outdoor spaces such as gardens and



Fig. 5.3.g Elemental, Quinta Monroy, 2003-2004, Iquique, Chile.



Fig. 5.3.h Quinta Monroy with the additions made by the inhabitants.

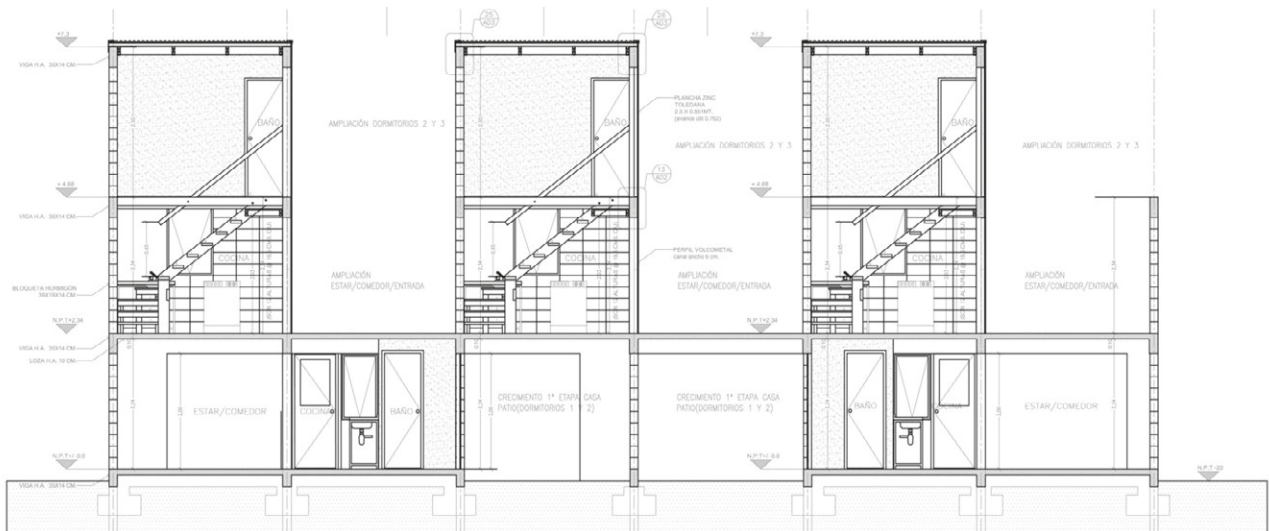


Fig. 5.3.i Quinta Monroy, section.



Fig. 5.3.j Quinta Monroy at the end of construction works.



Fig. 5.3.k Quinta Monroy with the additions made by the inhabitants.

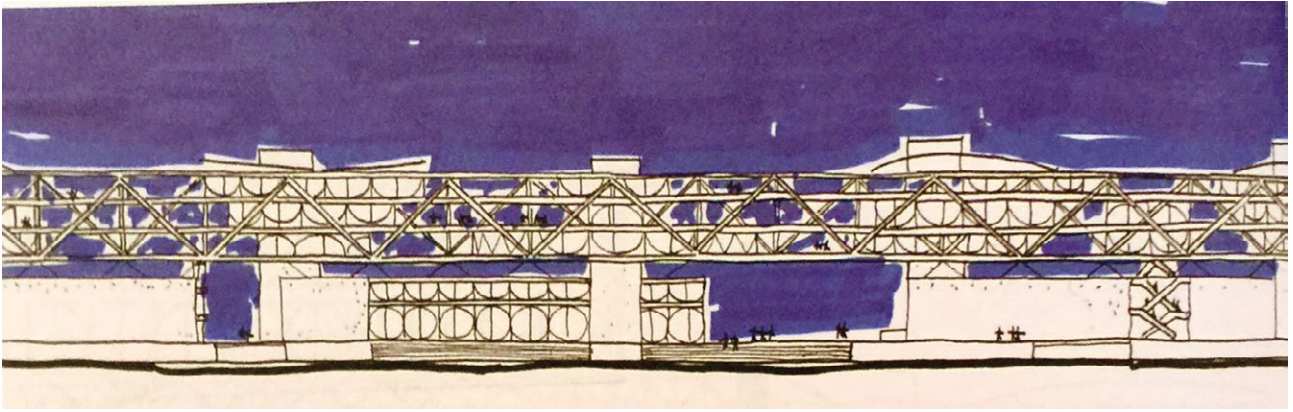
terraces and, in the intentions of the designer, the neighborhood was to be served by a nursery, a library, a cinema, an ambulatory, sport facilities and shops. The general configuration was complex, with private, semi-private, semi-public, and public spaces, and was enriched by a variety of paths on different levels. For De Carlo, participation meant to involve the future inhabitants in the process of imagining space, building a dialogue with them, but the designer still kept control over the formal outcome of the project.

A more modern take on the theme of participation is exemplified by Quinta Monroy, a residential neighborhood in Iquique, Chile, designed between 2003 and 2004 by Elemental, an architectural firm led by Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena (b. 1967). In this case, the strategy was to build only half of every house, leaving the other half to be completed in the future by the inhabitants themselves (figs. 5.3.g-k). This way, the initial cost of the buildings decreases, but the value of the dwellings will increase with time, giving to the inhabitants the opportunity of getting out of their condition of poverty. The houses are gathered in groups of twenty units, arranged around a semi-public area that encourages social relations between the different families. Each building includes a structure that can be completed in a simple and practical way by the inhabitants, up to a surface of 72 square meters. The users of the architecture thus become also the designers, at least in part. In Aravena's project, the act of participation is moved from the design phase to the use phase, and becomes a means to fight poverty.

Through a participatory approach, order is not imposed by the architect on space and its inhabitants, but emerges from the collaboration of a plurality of actors. As argued by J. Baird Callicott, a "top-down" order is typical of Western philosophy, as demonstrated by Plato's Forms or Heraclitus's *Logos*, while Chinese thought privileges a "bottom-up" perspective, arising from "the mutual adjustment of many natural forces and processes, among which conflicts and tensions are resolved and accommodations worked out to achieve a synergistic whole" (1994, p. 70). This kind of social harmony based on participation would reflect the Daoist ideal of natural harmony, as well as the an ecological worldview:

The incredibly rich and detailed order of terrestrial nature is emergent, not designed. . . . the emergent order of nature . . . is the outcome of a process of mutual adjustment among plants, animals, the earth, and the atmosphere over many millennia. (p. 71)

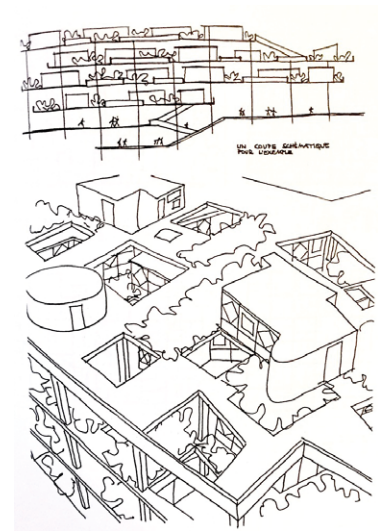
Another approach that has been gaining popularity in recent years, and that ensures a sort of collaboration between designers and users in defining the spaces of architecture, is that of flexibility. This concept can take two different forms, typological flexibility and technological flexibility, but both are based on the idea that the inhabitants of a building



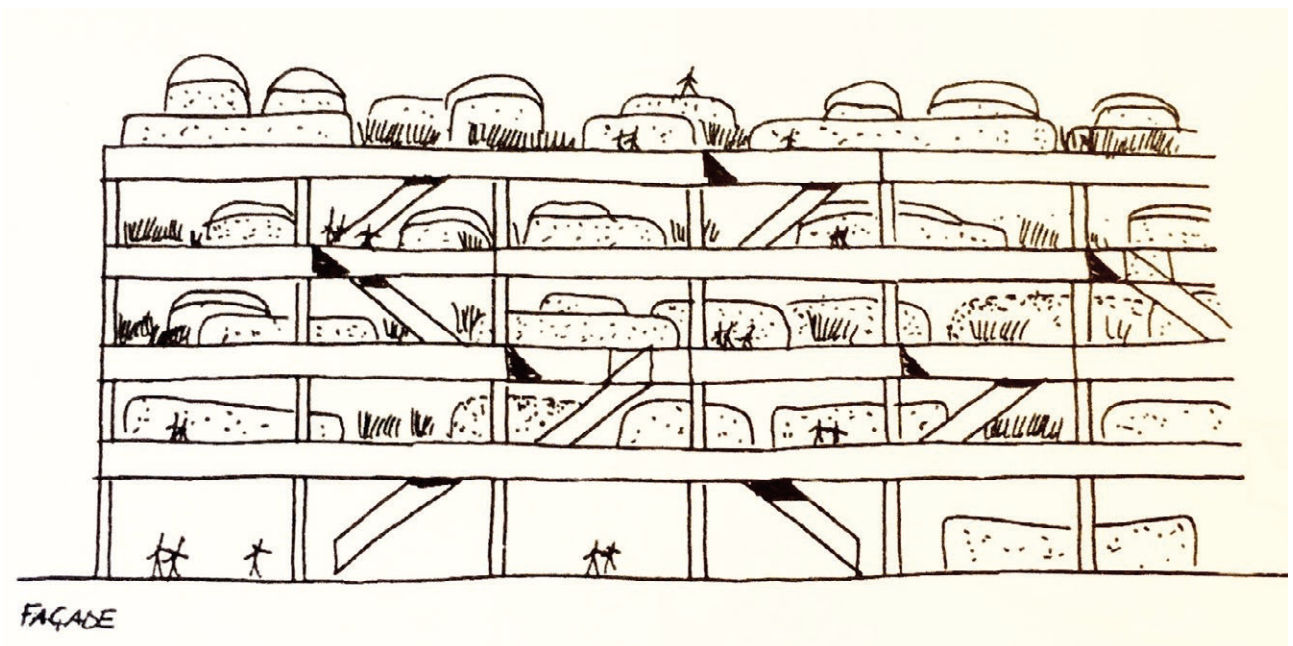
■ Fig. 5.3.l Yona Friedman, sketch of a project for the House of the Parliament of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1967.



■ Fig. 5.3.m Yona Friedman, view of the *Ville Spatiale*, 1958-1962.



■ Fig. 5.3.n Yona Friedman, *Green Architecture*, 1979.



■ Fig. 5.3.o Yona Friedman, *Green Architecture*, 1979.

should be able to modify the architecture in which they live according to their needs and creativity. In the case of typological flexibility, space can be rearranged or personalized, for example by moving walls or adding volumes; on the other hand, technological flexibility consists in the possibility of easily disassembling specific technological components of the building in order to move or replace them.

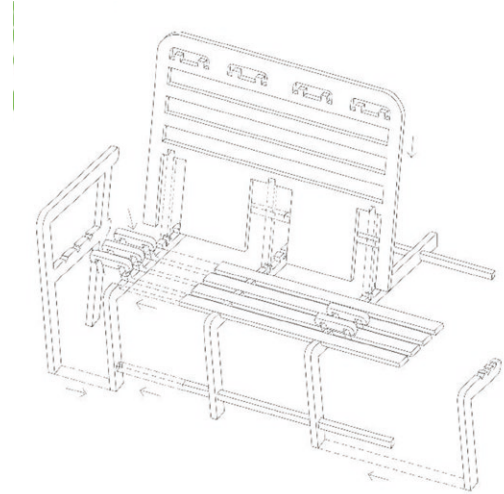
It is worth noting that a similar conception of flexibility is found in Chinese classical gardens. As explained in paragraph 2.5.4, Chinese traditional architecture was standardized and based on a fixed anthropometric module: in this way, buildings could assume a variety of configurations, being assembled, disassembled and reused. Thanks to this high degree of flexibility, the inhabitants of the garden could easily reorganize the pavilions, adding or removing pieces of furniture, or wooden screens, thus adapting them to different functions, as mentioned in paragraph 2.8.3.

However, there are even more radical proposals that aim at deleting the hierarchy between architect and inhabitant. One of them, advocated by Hungarian-French architect Yona Friedman (1923-2020), is the “architecture of survival” (Friedman, 2003/2009). This proposal is based on the assumption that the ecological crisis will determine a widespread condition of poverty, and that architecture will have to adapt to this new situation, ensuring the survival of human societies. Beyond this apocalyptic prophecy, however, Friedman makes a series of interesting points. He argues that today there is a deep problem of communication between architect and inhabitant, with the former arrogantly pretending to know what the latter desires (pp. 16-18). The solution for reestablishing a healthy communication between inhabitant and architect, and especially between inhabitant and inhabited space, is to allow people to plan themselves their own dwellings. This is possible, for example, by conceiving buildings as systems made of a rigid infrastructure and flexible infills (p. 25; figs. 5.3.1-o). According to Friedman’s proposal, inhabitants would achieve the freedom of expressing themselves, while architects would play the role of teachers and consultants (pp. 45-47). People would be able to decorate their homes as they desire, unleashing their imagination (pp. 151-152).

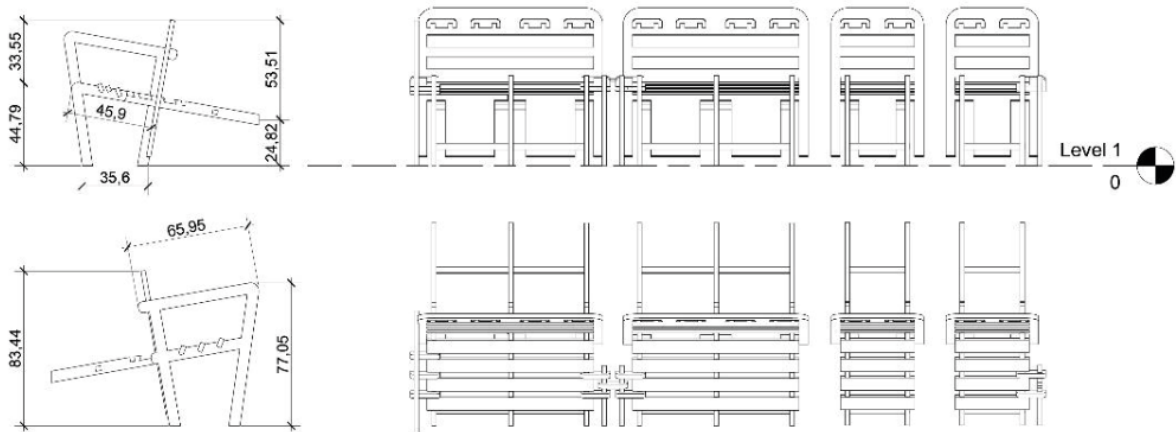
Finally, another tendency that, like Friedman’s “architecture of survival,” encourages people to freely express their creativity, is represented by the Open Source movement. This approach is based on completely different premises and can be found in several disciplines, from computer software to literature, from art to politics, from medicine to teaching. It is based on the interaction – made possible by contemporary technological advancements – of several participants, who share their knowledge with each other and with the rest of the world. The concept of “open source architecture” has been advocated by Italian architect



■ Fig. 5.3.p Open source project for the Cavallo Pazzo Park, Rome: render of the “Fit-It!” chair.



■ Fig. 5.3.q Cavallo Pazzo Park: technical detail of the “Fit-It!” chair.



■ Fig. 5.3.r Cavallo Pazzo Park: technical details of the “Fit-It!” chair.



■ Fig. 5.3.s Cavallo Pazzo Park: 3D model of the “Fit-It!” chair.



■ Fig. 5.3.t Cavallo Pazzo Park: the “Fit-It!” chair.

and engineer Carlo Ratti (b. 1971), who defines it as “an inclusive approach to spatial design, a collaborative use of design software and the transparent operation throughout the course of a building and city’s life cycle” (2014, p. 131). Concretely, it means that architecture can no longer be the work of a single individual, the architect, but rather the result of the interaction between architect and inhabitants:

[Open Source Architecture] relies upon amateurs as much as experienced professionals – the genius of the mass as much as that of the individual – eroding the binary distinction between author and audience. (p. 132)

One of the first examples of open source-designed space is the Cavallo Pazzo Park in the Garbatella neighborhood in Rome. In it, architecture students from Roma Tre University, together with professor Stefano Converso, have experimented the creation of urban furniture through the use of open source technologies. They cooperated with a local neighborhood association, involving the citizens in the design and having them manage the park after the completion of the construction works. By using innovative technology offered by Rome’s Fab Lab,¹ the students could actually create the components and assemble them in order to realize the pieces of furniture that they had designed, and then they could share their projects and ideas so that everyone could make them in a simple and practical way (figs. 5.3.p-t). The Cavallo Pazzo Park is a perfect example of cooperation between different actors and participation of future users of a space to its design process.

Through to these innovative approaches, the individual becomes once again the protagonist of the space in which he lives, actively giving shape to it, finally regaining the freedom to express his natural creativity and to share it with everyone else. The old paradigm of society as a set of gears in which everyone has to fulfil his duty in order for the social machine to work is thus replaced with a social harmony in which, as written in the *Yuan Ye*, “happiness consists in enjoying one’s freedom” (as cited in Morris, 1983, p. 93).

5.4 INTERIOR HARMONY

Section 5.2 has demonstrated how, in a Chinese classical garden, humans can establish emotional relationships with other natural elements and feel empathy towards them, thus achieving natural harmony. Section 5.3 has argued that the Nature that is present in the garden constitutes a source of social harmony, inspiring the imagination of the individual

¹ A *fab lab* (fabrication laboratory) is a small workshop that offers personal digital fabrication and shares the open source philosophy. Fab labs are spread all over the world: for example, in China there are 45.

and giving him the freedom to express his creativity and to share it. To sum up, Nature in the Chinese classical garden allows humans to realize two fundamental traits of their own inner nature, their *ziran*: empathy and creativity.

There is, however, another crucial element that is missing, and that can be defined as “interior harmony,” somehow related to the Buddhist idea of “mindfulness.” According to Wen Zhenheng’s *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, the main purpose of the garden is to convey a sense peace and tranquility like the one that a hermit would feel while living in the mountains, forgetting everything but the present moment:

those who dwell there forget age, those who visit forget parting and those who wander there forget weariness. (2019, p. 19)

In the garden, it becomes possible to attain this particular mental state thanks to the annulment of the separation between mind and body, and thanks to abstract symbolisms that lead to the interior growth of the visitor and the cultivation of virtue.

Similar ideas can be found not only in Chinese classical gardens, but have also been present in the works of many of the greatest masters of the history of architecture. In the last paragraph of this section, the works of Antoni Gaudí, Luis Barragán, Vann Molyvann, and Carlo Scarpa, will be taken as examples.

5.4.1 Meditative thinking

Today, the dominant way of thinking is deeply defined by the techno-scientific mindset. According to Martin Heidegger, “calculative thinking” is now prevailing, narrowing the variety of mental states that humans can experience and forcing them to adopt a standardized thought:

the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could so captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking may someday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking. . . . Then man would have denied and thrown away his own special nature – that he is a meditative being. (1959/1966, p. 56)

It is necessary that humans cultivate different ways of thinking, living, looking at the world. Taking inspiration from Chinese classical gardens, a meditative space par excellence, it is possible to create architectures that stimulate self-knowledge and self-awareness by allowing the individual to intimately feel his own body and mind. Humans will thus be reminded that they are meditative beings.

In the Chinese classical garden, space is not organized according to rational, regular pat-

terns, and its order is not logical. It can, instead, be defined as

“acosmotic” (that is, it does not entail the assumption of a single-ordered universe) and oriented towards actual particulars whose various correlations are construable only in terms of constituent details. (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. p. 184)

It is not an objective order that reflects the logical essence of a rational God, but rather an order that makes sense only if it is seen from a particular perspective: something that can be defined as a “focus/field conception of order,” in which the activity of naming plays a fundamental role, as it is one of the main means to define the focus from which the order acquires its meaning (Hall & Ames, 1998, pp. 184-185).

The order of the universe is reflected in that of the Chinese classical garden, and by contemplating its details it becomes possible to reach a state of detachment that makes one aware of the world outside and of its timeless fundamental truths (Barnhart, 1983, p. 14). This mental state allows to get an understanding of the Dao and of its consonance with one’s life: this is a distinctive trait of the inner nature of human beings. And this trait can be truly expressed not through rational, intellectual thinking, but only by practical actions and behaviors (D. E. Cooper, 2014, pp. 103-104).

5.4.2 Body and mind

In Chinese traditional thought there is no dualism between body and mind, as there is none between subject and object or nature and artifice. It is for this reason that, in order for the visitor to attain a mental state of understanding and awareness, both of one’s self and of the universe, the Chinese classical garden has to stimulate his body as much as his mind.

In fact, the purpose of the multisensoriality of the garden, that has already been discussed, is to activate all the five senses of the human body in a way that conveys the sense of peace and tranquility that is needed in order to merge with the cosmic flow.

It is important to note that this stimulation is not planned in a rational, scientific way, but is just based on intuition. For example, if one looks at the acoustic aspect, he finds out that traditional landscape essays never mention quantitative facts or systematic theories, but contain just poetic suggestions and subjective experiences. In the *Yuan Ye*, in fact, one can read expressions such as “in the forest cooers call for rains, and over the river horses neigh against winds,” or “pine trees hidden in isolated places, the sound of tides are clear, cranes dance with paces” (as cited in Yuan & Wu, 2008, p. 172). Through these intuitions, the sounds of the garden are meant to instill in the body of the visitor the harmonious rhythm of the universe.

Besides, the absence of a body-mind dualism, implicates that in Chinese thought there is also no clear distinction between what the body does and what the mind thinks, so there is no dualism between practice and theory:

saying, or even thinking, something about the world is doing something to the world. Ideas and words are dispositional and performative. . . . In the classical Chinese world view, thinking and speaking are ‘actions’ that have real consequences in shaping our environments (Hall & Ames, 1998, p. 183).

This explains the importance of naming the buildings and scenes of the Chinese classical gardens: names are thought to have the actual power of shaping the environment and influencing the actions performed by the visitors, so they were considered just as real as sensorial perceptions.

5.4.3 Virtue

In the quest for awareness of one’s self and of the universe, a fundamental role is played by the symbolic elements of the Chinese classical garden. They contribute to the aesthetics of the garden through the principle of *de-yi wang-yan*, that appears in the *Zhuangzi* and means “forgetting words after getting meaning”: it consists in the fact that the meaning of a work of art should make the viewer forget its surface after having understood its deeper significance (Pan, 1995, p. 15). It is important to stress, however, that the symbolisms of the Chinese classical gardens do not have fixed, univocal meanings, but can be interpreted through a variety of images, emotions, associations and literary references (Fung, 2002, pp. 199-203): they find their meaning not in abstract, universal ideas, but in the particular experience of the individual who is encountering them.

Thanks to the messages conveyed by these symbolisms, and to the greater self-awareness that one obtains as a result, it becomes possible to enhance and cultivate virtue. The Chinese classical garden is a place for self-growth and self-improvement, and the cultivation of virtue is a consequence not only of the symbolic meanings and references that one can find in plants and inscriptions, but also of the very act of taking care of the garden’s vegetation. “Cultivation of the garden is also a cultivation of self”, made possible by the exercise of the virtues of “patience, care and concern for living things, mindfulness and flexibility, and appreciation of beauty” (D. E. Cooper, 2018b).

5.4.4 Towards an architecture of interior harmony

Modern architects, while focusing on the ideal of “efficiency,” often forget the importance of creating poetic spaces. However, this was not the case with the works of many great

masters of architecture. This section will propose the analysis of a series of exemplary works in which a strong synthesis of the material and the spiritual dimensions allows people to become aware of their inner self, encouraging meditation, reflection, and self-cultivation.

The Parc Güell (fig. 5.4.a), designed by Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí and realized in Barcelona between 1900 and 1914, is a good starting point. It represents a magnificent expression of Gaudí's ideal of a spiritual harmony that connects humans to Nature and God. Drawing its inspiration from Gothic and Moorish architecture, the Parc Güell features a great variety of atmospheres, designs, materials, colors, textures. There are animal-shaped benches decorated with colorful mosaics (fig. 5.4.b), wide terraces that offer splendid views of the city (fig. 5.4.c), nightmarish caves that evoke stony forests buried in the depths of the earth (fig. 5.4.d). Colors, in particular, play an important role in this project, conveying different feelings and suggesting associations: for example, the massive use of blue reminds of Gothic frescoes (fig. 5.4.e). The use of natural, organic forms evokes a sense of familiarity and belonging: "Gaudí was able to empathise with human needs and expectations, looking at human interaction with the environment and replicating it into buildings" (Wanick, 2016). By walking through the park, one's senses are continuously stimulated with a variety of perceptions of darkness and light, roughness and smoothness, natural and artificial, horizontal and vertical, curved and straight. But the strength of this project lies not only in its rich materiality: it also suggests deep spiritual meanings, symbolisms, associations that are open to interpretation. Gaudí believed that architecture had a moral purpose, glorifying the Nature that God had created, and at the same time encouraging people to find the goodness in themselves and to live in harmony.

Another interesting case in which an architect conceived a project with the aim of achieving a harmonious spiritual union of humans and Nature is El Pedregal, a residential development designed by Mexican architect Luis Barragán and realized between 1945 and 1950 in the outskirts of Mexico City. The architect had the idea of transforming the inhospitable Pedregal lava fields into "a livable garden, where Man and Nature could become reconciled": this, for him, was "a holy mission" (Ambasz, 1976, p. 11). Its intention was to design a neighborhood that would live in symbiosis with the existing lava formations and their luxuriant vegetation made of cacti, flowers, and peeper trees: "he conceived the garden as the soul of the house" (p. 11). He carved into the rocks irregular paths that led the inhabitants through balanced compositions of vegetation, water pools and stone walls (figs. 5.4.g-l). Every element was in perfect harmony, so that "the gardens seemed to have been born together with the sea of lava" (p. 11). Barragán's view was that architecture had to always convey a sense of peace and tranquility: he stated that "any work of architecture which



■ Fig. 5.4.a Antoni Gaudí, Parc Güell, 1900-1914, Barcelona.



■ Fig. 5.4.b Parc Güell: curvilinear bench decorated with mosaics.



■ Fig. 5.4.c Parc Güell: detail of the main terrace.



■ Fig. 5.4.d Parc Güell: the Carob's Viaduct, a cave-like structure.



■ Fig. 5.4.e Parc Güell: dragon-shaped fountain on the main staircase.



■ Fig. 5.4.f Parc Güell: the Laundry Room Portico.



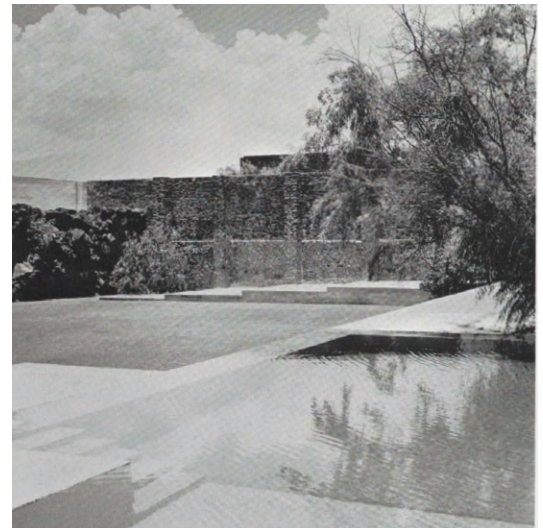
■ **Fig. 5.4.g** Luis Barragán, El Pedregal, 1945-1950, Mexico City.



■ **Fig. 5.4.h** El Pedregal: steps and paths carved in the rocks.



■ **Fig. 5.4.i** El Pedregal: fountain, pond, birds and trees.



■ **Fig. 5.4.j** El Pedregal: pool and stone walls.



■ **Fig. 5.4.k** El Pedregal: a path carved in the rocks.



■ **Fig. 5.4.l** El Pedregal: fountain, pond and rocks.



Fig. 5.4.m Vann Molyvann, National Sports Complex, 1963-1964, Phnom Penh.



Fig. 5.4.n National Sports Complex: water pool and concrete structure.

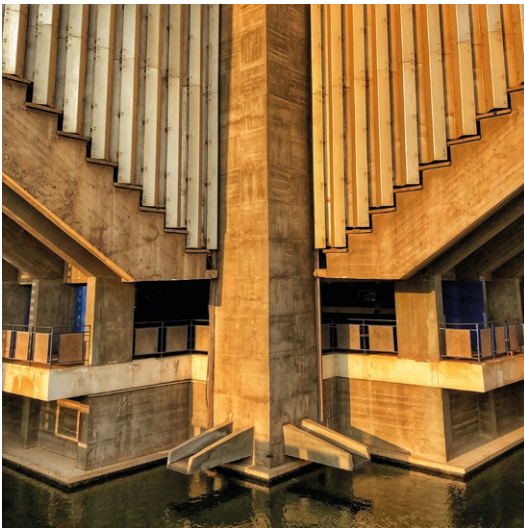


Fig. 5.4.o National Sports Complex: detail of a water pool.



Fig. 5.4.p National Sports Complex: sunset at the main stadium.

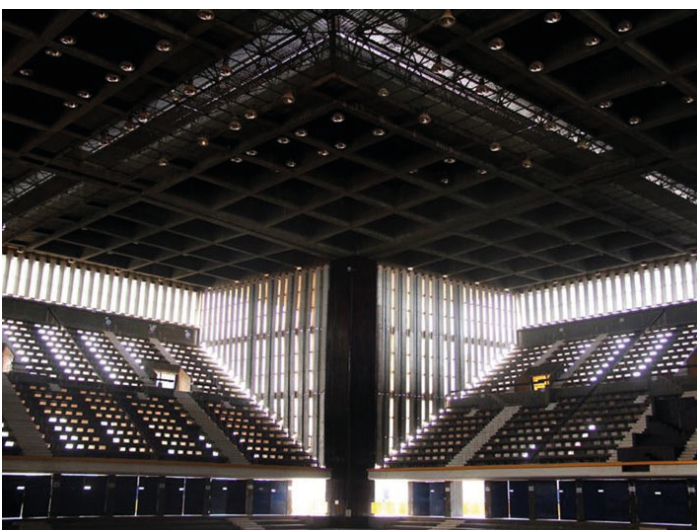


Fig. 5.4.q National Sports Complex: view of the the indoor arena.

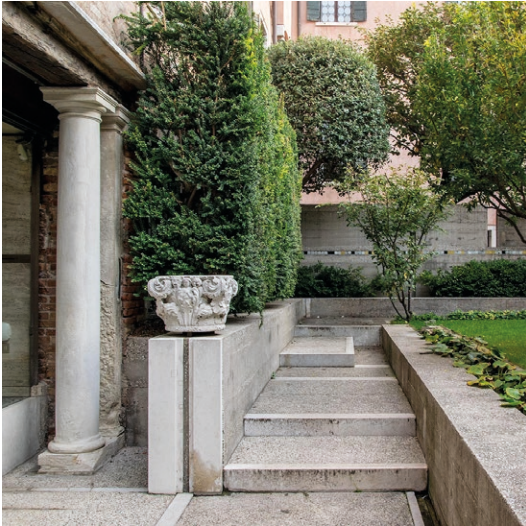


Fig. 5.4.r National Sports Complex: citizens dancing.

does not express serenity is a mistake” and that he believed in an “emotional architecture” (as cited in Ambasz, 1976, p. 8). According to him, by creating spaces where people could peacefully encounter Nature, he would encourage them to appreciate and pursue beauty: “the construction and enjoyment of a garden accustoms people to beauty, to its instinctive use, even to its pursuit” (p. 8). In the following decades, unfortunately, Barragán’s original project was abandoned, and the dynamics of the real estate market took over, turning El Pedregal into a densely built neighborhood. However, even though the deeply spiritual vision of harmony conceived by the architect has been lost, it still constitutes a great teaching for contemporary designers.

Another valuable lesson can be found in Phnom Penh’s National Sports Complex, designed by Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann (1926-2017) and built between 1963 and 1964. This project expresses a deep “iconic symbolism” (Nelson, 2017) that draws its meanings from the history and the spirituality of Cambodia. The references to the monumental architectures of the ancient Khmer temples of Angkor are numerous, from the general layout of the complex, that is arranged around a central axis of symmetry (fig. 5.4.m), to constructive details such as the louvered windows that allow natural light to fill the interior while keeping the heat outside. Moreover, water plays a significant role both from a practical and a symbolical point of view: the project includes large water pools that cool down the air and at the same time remind of the *barays*, large artificial reservoirs typical of ancient Khmer architecture that represented the “Sea of Creation” that surrounded the mythical Mount Meru in Hindu cosmology (figs. 5.4.n-o). However, while these allusions to the temples and *barays* of Angkor are extremely important, Roger Nelson argues that the resonances with the domestic, vernacular architecture of Cambodia are just as crucial (2017). According to him, in the National Sports Complex “the age-old but continuously used housing technology of the vertical stilt or column was extended in previously unimaginable directions by modern engineering technologies and by the use of steel-reinforced concrete in place of timber” (Nelson, 2017). But the references to vernacular dwellings lie not only in the appearance of this architecture, but especially in the way it is experienced. Despite its immense size, in fact, the space of the complex is organized in “unmonumental” small-scale zones. This, argues Nelson, can be clearly understood by considering the space of the indoor arena (fig. 5.4.q):

Square in form and covered by a dramatic cruciform suspended concrete roof, this is one of the finest of many examples of Molyvann’s use of cross-ventilation to provide natural cooling. Under each of the approximately 8,000 seats is a small opening, through which air from outside (as well as some light) can pass. Of course, this opening functions to cool down the entire space. But whenever there is an even



■ Fig. 5.4.s Carlo Scarpa, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, 1961-1963, Venice.



■ Fig. 5.4.t Fondazione Querini Stampalia: small fountain.



■ Fig. 5.4.u Fondazione Querini Stampalia: small fountain.



■ Fig. 5.4.v Fondazione Querini Stampalia: old capitols.



■ Fig. 5.4.w Fondazione Querini Stampalia: statue of a lion.



■ Fig. 5.4.x Fondazione Querini Stampalia: vegetation.

slight breeze (as there very often is at this elevation), each individual spectator can feel it against her or his own legs. Watching a sports match or performance, as spectators we may often tend to forget ourselves, to come to feel as if dissolved into a mass. Yet the individuated vents in the indoor stadium disrupt this viewing experience; we become bodily aware of our specific position. In short, our experience of the vast space of the indoor stadium is transformed into the experience of a much smaller space: that of our own seat. (2017)

A similar intimacy can be experienced also in the swimming pool seating, that faces away from the main stadium, but a general sense of domesticity permeates the whole project, as demonstrated by the fact that up until today Phnom Penh citizens gather in the Sport Complex every day at dusk to meet their friends, practice sports, and dance (fig. 5.4.r). Molyvann's work is an extraordinary example of how even large-scale monumental projects can be an occasion for the architect to design intimate, collected spaces that enhance interior harmony.

Finally, the last figure that will be considered in this paragraph is that of Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa (1906-1978). He was interested in Eastern culture and architecture, and had a fascination for Japanese gardens. Many of his works are permeated with a sense of deep interior harmony: spaces that convey a sense of peace and tranquility, ideal for meditation, multisensorial perceptions that help to become aware of one's body and mind, abstract symbolisms and associations that stimulate deep reflections and help one grow.

Two projects in particular will be analyzed: the garden of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia and the Brion Cemetery. The former is located in a 16th century palace in Venice and has been designed between 1961 and 1963. It is the garden of a cultural foundation that includes a museum and a library, for which Scarpa was also in charge of the restoration of the ground floor. The space is simple, yet rich of carefully planned details. Even though the area is small and surrounded by tall palaces, Scarpa managed to create a quiet, delightful garden, with an unmistakably Eastern touch. Different elements are perfectly balanced: paths made of smooth concrete and rough stone (fig. 5.4.s), giving different tactile perceptions to the visitor; the relaxing sound of water spilling from the small fountains (figs. 5.4.t-u); old capitals (fig. 5.4.v) and sculptures with ancient meanings, such as the statue of a lion, an allegoric representation of the city of Venice (fig. 5.4.w); scented trees of cherry, magnolia and pomegranate, each with its symbolism (fig. 5.4.x).

The Brion Cemetery, on the other hand, is a modern addition to the municipal cemetery of San Vito d'Altivole, a small village north-west of Venice, and has been realized between 1968 and 1978. Its plan, bigger than that of the Querini Stampalia Garden, has the shape of an L and includes two burial areas (one for Giuseppe Brion, who commissioned the work,



■ Fig. 5.4.y Carlo Scarpa, Brion Cemetery, 1968-1978, San Vito d'Altivole (Treviso).



■ Fig. 5.4.z Brion Cemetery: chapel, pond and cypresses.



■ Fig. 5.4.aa Brion cemetery: detail of a path in the pond.



■ Fig. 5.4.ab Brion cemetery: detail of a path in the pond.



■ Fig. 5.4.ac Brion Cemetery: a “double moon-gate.”



■ Fig. 5.4.ad Brion Cemetery: detail of a small fountain and concrete structures.

and his wife, and one for the other relatives of the couple), a grove of cypresses, a chapel, a pond, and a meditation pavilion (figs. 5.4.y-ab). The balanced composition of water, plants, tombs and buildings reminds of that of a Chinese classical garden, even though in this case the configuration of the space is much simpler and more linear. Again, the use of several different materials, with various textures and colors, generates a wide range of multisensory perceptions, that combine with the sounds produced by water and wind. Plants like the water lilies in the pond and the cypresses of the grove (that in Italy are traditionally associated with death and are often found in cemeteries) contribute to the general sense of peace that the place conveys to the visitor, thanks to their color, sound, scent, and meaning. There is even a sort of “double moon-gate” that is explicitly inspired by Eastern gardens, but reminds also of the wedding rings that symbolize the bond of love and loyalty that united Giuseppe Brion to his wife (fig. 5.4.ac).

The projects of Gaudí, Barragán, Molyvann and Scarpa show different ways through which architecture can create places with an atmosphere of peace and tranquility that allows people to achieve interior harmony, forgetting everything and enjoying a deeper awareness of the cosmic flow of Nature.

CONCLUSIONS: A NEW HARMONY

Contemporary society – and architecture – need to re-define their relationship with Nature in order to face the deep ecological and ideological crisis of today. Through the analysis of Chinese classical gardens and of the relationship between humans and Nature in the Chinese tradition, it has been possible to find new, different ideas and points of view that can actually play a great role in revolutionizing the paradigms of architectural design. This final chapter will propose five principles that can hopefully contribute to creating an architecture for the 21st century that welcomes the values of natural, social, and interior harmony. In the spirit of the *Yuan Ye*, that did not contain fixed formulae but only general rules, the following list will outline principles that are open to different interpretations and that can easily be adapted to the context, function and purpose of any architecture, to the imagination of any architect or urban planner, and even to the creativity of common people.

The first principle is **non-domination**. This concept is not meant to be understood as related to the Western philosophical idea of “negative liberty,” but rather to the Daoist principle of *wu wei*, or “non-action,” described in paragraph 5.1.5. It means that architects should design in accordance with Nature, allowing every creature, element and material to freely express its own *ziran*, that is its inner nature, its “self-so-ness.” Buildings and cities should be designed not only for the needs of humans, but also for those of animals, plants, fungi and microorganisms, welcoming and enhancing biodiversity. Materials should be used according to their features and strengths. Technology should not be used in service of any form of domination and control, whether of human over Nature or human over human, but rather as a means to achieve harmony. Architects should not impose their will, but let the future inhabitants and users of their projects express their ideas and desires. Spaces should be non-hierarchical, complex, irregular, letting individuals free of wandering without the need to answer to social conventions and hierarchies. Architecture should be open and flexible enough to change and evolve: it should not only be ready to answer to present necessities, but it should also be able to adapt and respond to future spontaneous developments and transformations both of its human users and of its animal and vegetal guests. The relationship between architecture and ecology should be studied in depth, so that the buildings and cities of the 21st century can make Nature flourish.

The second principle is **sympiosis**. It means that every element and material that is part of an architectural project and every person and creature that inhabits it should be in a network of relationships based on solidarity and cooperation, where everyone and everything

get to be somehow enhanced and improved. As shown by the principles of *yin* and *yang*, the different elements should establish relations of interdependence and complementarity. Architecture should make the surrounding environment better (more beautiful, rich, lively, healthy, etc.), and in turn the environment should make architecture better. Materials should be biodegradable or upcyclable, and should be assembled with reversible technologies, so that they can be easily disassembled and start a new life as biological or technical nutrients. Architecture should improve the life of the community for which it is built, and the community should take care of architecture. People should live in symbiosis with their houses, offices, schools, and every other place which they inhabit, interacting with space through flexibility and participation. Architecture should answer to their needs, and in turn they should transform and improve the places where they live, thus expressing their creativity. Buildings and cities should become so integrated into ecological and social systems that it will no longer be possible to distinguish them. New materials and techniques should be devised, so that architecture can stop being a major source of pollution and global warming and can finally establish a symbiotic relationship with Nature. New design approaches should be conceived, so that architects and inhabitants can establish a symbiotic relationship as well, allowing each of them to express his creativity and benefit from the mutual interactions.

The third and fourth elements are **embodiment** and **spirituality**. They are described together because architecture should no longer separate the transcendent from the material: the human body and mind are one. These principles mean that architecture should stimulate at the same time the senses and the intellect of the people who live in it. Space should be deeply connected to the perceptions of the human body, creating the conditions for comfort and relax. Architecture should stimulate the five senses, conveying different feelings and emotions, making individuals more and more aware of themselves, helping them understand their inner truth. Projects should also suggest abstract meanings and reflections, symbols, associations, archetypes. They should create mystical spaces where people can find the peace and tranquility needed for prayer, meditation, and any kind of activity that allows them to forget everything but the present moment and merge with the cosmic flow. The relationship between architecture, neuroscience, and psychology should be studied in depth, clarifying the physiological and psychical reactions one produces when interacting with different kinds of spatial perceptions and symbolisms.

Finally, the fifth and last principle is **uselessness**. Technological tools and ideas of “efficiency” should be means, not ends. Sometimes, architecture should also be useless, vague, void. In fact, it is only through uselessness that it becomes possible to establish an emo-

tional, empathetic relationship with other living and non-living beings, one that is truly sincere and disinterested. It is only through vagueness that human imagination is freed and creativity can find the space to actually express itself. And it is only in the void that one can achieve the mental state of peace, tranquility and forgetfulness that is needed to blend with the universe. This means that projects should in some cases welcome, for example, undefined spaces, unexpected walls or openings, paths and lines that could be short and straight but become long and twisting. The only limit of this principle is that it does not take into account economic sustainability. In fact, the “useless” elements included in Chinese classical gardens were possible only because they were mostly for members of the rich and powerful elite of imperial China: only they could afford to spend time and resources for what was superfluous. Therefore, the relationship between architecture and economics should be researched in depth. Through a cooperation between these disciplines, hopefully new paradigms that will replace that of the neoliberal city will be devised. This way, there will be room for what is “useless” and does not bring economic gains, but carries different kinds of benefits, such as physical and psychological well-being, a high quality of life, a balanced ecosystem, and a stimulation of creativity for everyone.

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