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Serenity Pervades a Chinese Garden of the Ming Dynasty

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Serenity pervades a Chinese garden of the Ming dynasty, for this is a place of retreat from the doings of humankind. It is where the functionary of the kingdom could indulge his "longing for mountains and water" without turning his back on his unrelenting obligations to state and family.

Yet serenity is only the first of infinite layers that reveal themselves. The object of the garden is to capture all the elements of the natural landscape--mountains, rivers, lakes, trees, valleys, hills--and, by bringing them together in a small space, to concentrate the life force, the qi, that animates them.

It is a harmony of contrasts, of dark and light, solid and empty, hard and soft, straight and undulating, yin and yang. This place was created to be savoured ever a lifetime. New meanings would be found in the symbolic objects and plants, new pictures seen as shadows placed across the rocks. The garden unfolded itself slowly.

In this site, the Garden comes to life. The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Vancouver, British Columbia is the only full-sized classical Chinese garden outside China and though it was built in the 1980s, it employed the ancient techniques of the originals. For the architect, the botanist, the student of history, the lover of beauty, this site provides insights into the subtle wonders to be found within the walls of this living treasure.

A Walk Through the Garden

The Garden's Layers of Meaning

Originally designed by Taoist poets, classical gardens were meant to create an atmosphere of tranquility for contemplation and inspiration. The Chinese calligraphic inscription above the entrance to the Garden means "Garden of Ease."

There are four major elements in the Garden: water, rock, plants and architecture. The relationship of these four elements reflect the Taoist belief in Yin and Yang--opposites that must be in balance to create harmony.

Symbolism

The peace and tranquility inside a classical Chinese garden reflect the many symbols found within. It is a harmony of contrasts, of dark and light, solid and empty, hard and soft, straight and undulating, yin and yang.

Rocks

The Classical Chinese garden is noted for its prolific use of fantastically shaped stones. The extravagantly convoluted limestones are sometimes displayed singly on a base like a piece of sculpture. At other places in the garden, they are piled high in false-mountains or are formed into a sinuous, writing, edge to the lake or pond. Their restless surfaces invite

the imagining of fanciful creatures embedded in the stone and create a sense of pulsating energy in the garden.

Plants in the Garden have symbolic significance. For example, in the Scholar's Study, three windows frame trees named "The Three Friends of Winter:" the pine tree, symbolizing fortitude and long-lasting friendship; the bamboo, signifying humankind's flexibility and resilience; and the winter-flowering plum tree, representing perseverance and rebirth.

Plants & Botanical Features of the Garden

Classical Chinese gardens contained plants known for their mystical and symbolic qualities. Unlike Western gardens in which plants are 'collected' and massed together, plants in this garden are used sparingly and each one is selected for its symbolic meaning and its ability to evoke a natural landscape.

This careful selection of plants creates different moods and gives each area a unique character. Wide open spaces in the rockeries are complemented with forceful plants such as the pine and cypress; in contrast, the small rectangular courtyard adjacent to the main hall demands refined and delicate plants such as the wispy bamboo and miniature rhododendron.

Trees and shrubs also define spaces in the Garden. A group of bamboo and pine trees near the grotto give the impression of a secluded mountain hideaway.

Selecting plants according to their blossom time is very important in a classical garden. This reinforces the importance of seasonal change and heightens the anticipation of spring as the Garden awakes from the winter months.

The colours of flowering trees in spring, the cool shades of green in the summer, the splendid rainbow of fall and the black, crows-perch tree branches in the winter. Unlike Western gardens, all the seasons are enjoyed in a Chinese garden.

Climatically, Vancouver and Suzhou are quite similar, so many of the plants in the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden are similar to those found in classical gardens of China. The banana--symbolic of the heart and soul of the garden--is kept in a green house during winter months and then brought to the Garden in warmer weather. It is placed in areas which contain bamboo--symbolic of the heart and soul of man.

The highly prized winter-flowering plum in the Scholar's Courtyard was located, after much investigation, in a White Rock chicken farm. The gnarly pine covered with moss which reaches out over the pond in front of The Lookout was found in Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park. Its character and shape--reminiscent of a dragon--was ideal for the Garden.

Building the Garden

The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden is the first full-scale classical scholar's garden to be built outside China.

Nine hundred and fifty crates from China, weighing nearly 2000 tons, contained all the elements of the Garden except the plants.

Artisans from China crafted the Garden as it would have been built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), using no power tools and no nails or screws.

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen

Known as the "Father of Modern China", Dr. Sun Yat-Sen was an important figure in the development of the Republic of China. He was internationally recognized by members of all political affiliations for his central role in the history of modern China. As the first non-gentry leader of a political movement, he sought to bring democracy to his country during the early years of the 20th century.

His connection with Vancouver is significant since he visited it several times on fundraising missions to support the revolution which ultimately overturned the monarchy. Born into a peasant family Cuiheng Village, Xiangshan County(now Zhaongshan City) in Quangdong Province on November 12, 1886, he was educated abroad and therefore exposed to Western thought at an early age. Although he became a doctor, he left his medical career in order to devote himself to the cause of democracy. As China's first professional revolutionary, he travelled around the world to promote the pro-democracy movement and raise funds for his work.

Montreal botanical gardens

Water occupies an important place in

the Dream Lake Garden. Water, which forms the Earth's arteries, symbolizes both life and feminine principle of the universe (yin). Its flat surface works like a mirror and seems to increase the dimensions of the

surroundings. Water is essential to the representation of nature as a whole, and its horizontal line counterbalances the effect of the mountains. Water is one of the dominant, unifying elements of this garden.

The lake is 60 meters long by 40 meters wide. Reflexions, along with the bridges spanning the water's branches, serve to make the garden appear even larger.

In some places, rock comes into contact with water; near the falls, large rocks emerge from the water. Rock and water are opposites : the water is yin, the rock yang. They are opposites, but they are linked, since they are two elements of a whole. From contrast and complementary, harmony is born.

Stones

If water represents the earth's arteries to the Chinese, stone, for them, is the skeleton. Stone is omnipresent in a garden and is perhaps the most distinctive element; it is to the Chinese garden as flower beds and lawns are to Western yards.

The grey rocks in this garden come from Tai Lake (500 metric tonnes imported from China), and the yellow ones from St.Hélène Island (set in the middle of the St.Lawrence Seaway, across from Montréal).

Rock was used as an isolated sculpture, chosen for its resemblance to whatever element or image one wanted to evoke. Heaped together, stones could form more complex mineral landscapes and recreate real mountains.

On its 2.5 hectares, the Chenese Garden

contains more than 200 varieties of perennials, 50 of aquatic plants, 15 of bamboos, 4 of annuals, 160 of shrubs and approximately 100 of trees.

Chinese gardens favor plants and trees that tradition and history have imparted with symbolism. Designers prefer more natural-looking perennial flowers over annuals.

In a Chinese garden, look neither for the lawns of the English garden nor the precise lines of the French garden.

The Scotch pine is a very important plant, representing longevity and the struggle for survival. Because it stays green, it is,

along with the bamboo and the apricot tree, one of the "three friends of winter".

The magnolia has traditionally represented wealth. It is also the emblem of Shanghai.

In China, the azalea (*Rhododendron*), together with the primrose and the gentian, is considered one of the "three famous flowers". The azalea and the cuckoo are said to be brother and sister since, in April, the bird sings its mournful song on the flowering branches of this plant. There are approximately 800 species of azalea in the world, most of which come from China.

Mandchurian Apricot (*Prunus mandshurica*)

- Flowering Almond (*Prunus triloba*)
- Bamboo (*Phyllostachys* spp)
- Peking Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster acutifolius*)
- Mandchurian Golden-bells (*Forsythia manshurica*)
- Maidenhair Tree (*Ginkgo biloba*)
- Fragrant Plantain Lily (*Hosta plantaginea*)
- Primrose Jasmine (*Jasminum mesnyi*)
- Chinese Lilac (*Syringa x chinensis*)
- Sacred Lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*)
- Chinese Matrimony Vine (*Lycium chinense*)
- Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)
- Mandchurian Walnut (*Juglans manshurica*)
- Fragrant Olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*)
- Tree Peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*)
- Buddhist Pine (*Podocarpus macrophyllus*)
- Chinese Pear Tree (*Prunus ussuriensis*)
- Spirea (*Spiraea thunbergii*)
- Oriental Thuja (*Thuja orientalis*)

The tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) is from

China. It embodies aristocracy, wealth and social status. It is the queen of flowers, paradoxically representing both female beauty and, the yang, the male principle. It may be one of the first flowers ever to be cultivated simply for ornamental purposes. Initially reserved for the emperor, then the richest classes, it eventually became accessible to all and was grown throughout China. Marco Polo, upon discovering Chinese peonies at the of the 8th century, called them "roses the size of cabbages". The plant's bark and roots are used in medicine. The plants generally bloom profusely in June.

A chrysanthemum (*Dendranthema xgrandiflorum*), also from China, produced the large-flowered specimen we see today. Once used for medicinal

purposes, this plant is now appreciated for its ornamental value and serves as a flavoring in certain types of tea.

Sweet osmanthus (*Osmanthus fragrans*) evokes autumn, the season when it blooms. It is said to be princely, elegant and eternal. It is also associated with the moon because, according to the legend, that is where a hare prepared an elixir of life in the shadow of the sweet osmanthus leaves. The creamy white flowers give off a subtle yet long-lasting scent similar to jasmine and are used in tea, wine, medicine and perfume.