The previous chapter showed how the Chinese garden provided charm, natural beauty, and pleasure for its owner and those who used it. It also showed, using Chen Fuyao’s account of a hermit-like life as an example, that a residential garden reflected a happy fit between a naturalistic setting and the pragmatic agenda for a leisurely, artistic, and practical life all the year through.

While Chen, a scholar, was happily going about his seasonal activities on his large estate, the artist Li Liweng enjoyed quietly focusing his view on vistas and the details of the various visual elements in his small garden. The lively description given of the episode in which he discovered the ‘unintentional painting’ attests to his passion for viewing the garden as a painting in three dimensions. Like all garden designers and connoisseurs, Li was deeply concerned and involved with the composition of his garden—the structuring of elements and the organization of scenes as perceived by the eyes of a landscape painter (Fig. 3.1).

In this chapter, the composition or syntax of the Chinese garden will be explored in terms of the principles of garden design and theories of landscape painting. To fill out the picture, a simplified design process for a private garden (Zhan Yuan of Nanjing, Jiangsu province) will be used as an illustration of a typical example.

Yuan Ye and the Theory of Garden Design

In the world of Chinese gardens, no coherent theory of design was available until Ji Cheng published his Yuan ye (The Manual of garden design) in 1634. Yuan ye, the only early monograph on Chinese garden design and construction to have survived to this day, is in essence a summation of Ji’s lifelong practices of gardening. A painter and garden-builder, Ji was among a small number of first-generation professional gardeners who practised their craft in the south-eastern provinces of China during the late Ming dynasty. His book is a collection of experiences rather than a system of theory and methods, a reaffirmation of long-held conventions instead of a proposal for innovation and revolution. The treatise has been translated into English by Alison Hardie and published as The Craft of Gardens (Ji, 1988) by Yale University Press. Its most influential suggestions for garden design are best summarized as follows.

In Yuan ye, Ji advocates a natural look in designed scenery so that ‘though man-made, it will look like something created naturally’ (vol. 1: On Gardens, 43). In Ji’s estimation, ‘skill in landscape design is shown in the ability to “follow” the lie of the land and “borrow from” the existing scenery; artistic excellence is shown in the “suitability” and “appropriateness” created in the garden’s overall look’ (vol. 1: A Theory of Construction, 39).

The principle of making use of ‘borrowed’ scenery in garden design is perhaps the single most important contribution made by Ji. Borrowing from one another, the scenes
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in a garden are linked together in a sequence. A garden becomes related to the surrounding environment when it borrows scenery beyond the confines of its walls (Plate 8). Ji thoughtfully encouraged ‘borrowing scenery from the distance, near at hand, above you, below you, and at certain times of the year’. In addition, the sounds, colours, and smells from a larger environment could also be borrowed to enhance the enjoyment of a particular garden (vol. 3, chap. 6: On Borrowing Scenery, 121).

Regarding the piling up of ‘artificial hills’, Ji’s treatise offers clear and precise instructions, such as ‘If a single rock is set upright in the center as the “chief stone” and two more rocks, known as “split peaks”, are inserted on each side, the single one will stand in solitary magnificence and the lesser ones will act as supporters’ (vol. 3, chap. 4: On Mountain-building, 106). Significantly, however, the book makes no mention of plants as garden elements.

Although written in general and descriptive terms throughout, Yuan ye contains a powerful implication of the design process in the chapter on the layout of the garden. In the layout of the space, the presentation to the visitor of the garden’s scenes is given the greatest emphasis. ‘The most important element in the layout of gardens is the siting of the principal buildings. The primary consideration is the view, and it is all the better if the buildings can face south’ (vol. 1, chap. 2: Layout, 54).

Ji had plenty to say about the use of rocks and water, considered by many Chinese gardeners, both before and after Ji’s time, as the two most important elements in a garden (Plate 9). Ji counselled the garden designer to ‘build up mountains from the excavated soil and form embankments along the edges of the ponds’, as well as offering that ‘high mounds can be further heightened and low-lying places should be dug deeper still’. His advice on the management of water is most intriguing: ‘Water should be allowed to flow freely as if it had no end, and when it blocks your path, build a bridge across it.’ This statement can be interpreted to suggest that the shape of a pond should be such that no end [or source] of the water can be seen along the main circulation route. Where the source of the water must reveal itself, one should build a bridge to cover it. An illusion would thus be created to imply that water comes from nowhere, and that it is endless (vol. 1, chap. 2: Layout, 55).

While Ji accepted such elements as winding walkways and zigzag footpaths as unchanging conventions of garden design, he was more liberal in the use of other architectural elements. ‘You must search out the unconventional and make sure it is in accord with your own wishes’, he advised. ‘The trite and conventional should be [totally] eliminated.’ He further questioned, ‘Why should all the main halls be built the same regardless of their location in the garden? Why set up a pavilion on top of rocks if there is no view from it?’ On other aspects of design, Ji favoured great variety in scenery, encouraged sensitive responses to individual site conditions, emphasized the importance of irregularity and asymmetry in design, and promoted elegance and simplicity in construction (vol. 1, chap. 1: Sites, and chap. 3: Buildings, 65).

The highlights of Yuan ye as cited above are intended to provide a general impression of how the Chinese garden is composed. Ji’s book, however, contains design ideas and general guidelines such as those outlined but fails to offer many clearly defined methods and rules for making a garden. To supplement his writing, suggestions of practical value and artistic interest are readily available from an array of classical literature. One such useful source of a simple genre is called xiaopinwen, familiar essays by scholar-gardeners such as Wen Zhenheng, Chen Fuyao, and

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Li Liweng. Their casual yet enlightening writings, those quoted in the previous chapter among them, shed useful light on the conception and techniques of design, as well as on the creative ways in which gardens were appreciated.

In addition to the writings of Wen, Chen, and Li, a little memoir by Shen Fu (1763–1808), Fusheng liuji (Six chapters of a floating life), contains a discussion of what can be called the ‘art of deception’ in scenery design for the Chinese garden. Using the formula, ‘showing the large in the small and the small in the large, providing for the real in the unreal and for the unreal in the real’, Shen deceived and delighted the beholder at the same time by revealing and concealing views alternately, making them sometimes apparent and sometimes hidden. In the chapter titled, ‘The Little Pleasures of Life’, he wrote:

In the big open spaces, plant bamboos that grow quickly and train plum trees with thick branches to cover them. This is to show the small in the large. When the courtyard is small, the wall should be a combination of convex and concave shapes, decorated with green, covered with ivy, and inlaid with big slabs of stone with inscriptions on them. Thus when you open your window, you seem to face a rocky hillside, alive with rugged beauty. This is to show the large in the small. Contrive so that an apparently blind alley leads suddenly into an open space and the kitchen leads through a back door into an unexpected courtyard. This is to provide for the real in the unreal. Let a door lead into a blind courtyard and conceal the view by placing a few bamboo trees and a few rocks. Thus you suggest something which is not there. Place low balustrades along the top of a wall so as to suggest a roof garden which does not exist. This is to provide for the unreal in the real (Lin, 1935: 331).

While Shen was primarily concerned with viewing scenery and experiencing spaces, an anonymous writer offered an explicit prescription for the design of an approach to a house garden. As Lin Yutang quoted him in The Importance of Living:

Inside the gate there is a footpath and the footpath must be winding. At the turning of the footpath there is an outdoor screen and the screen must be small. Behind the screen there is a terrace and the terrace must be level. On the banks of the terrace there are flowers and the flowers must be fresh. Beyond the flowers is a wall and the wall must be low. By the side of the wall, there is a pine tree and the pine tree must be old. At the foot of the pine tree there are rocks and the rocks must be quaint. Over the rocks there is a pavilion and the pavilion must be simple. Behind the pavilion are bamboos and the bamboos must be thin and sparse. At the end of the bamboos there is a house and the house must be secluded (Lin, 1937: 267).

Concerning the act of designing a garden, the early seventeenth-century writer Qi Biaojia would qualify as the spokesman for all garden-makers when he characterized the process as one that was reiterative and by trial and error:

In general, where there is too much space I put in a thing; where it is too crowded I take away a thing; where things cluster together I spread them out; where the arrangement is too diffuse I tighten it a bit; where it is difficult to walk upon I level it; and where it is level I introduce a little unevenness. It is like a good doctor curing a patient, using both nourishing and excitative medicines, or like a good general in the field, using both normal and surprise tactics. Again, it is like a master painter at his work, not allowing a single dead stroke (Lin, 1935: 335).

All three writers seem to have agreed with Ji Cheng, since their respective design approaches all fall within the confines of Ji’s preachings. In particular, Shen understood
perfectly the principle of visual perception and had mastered the art of contrast, concealment, and suggestion in the design of his humble garden. Like many scholar-gardeners before him, the unnamed author demonstrated his expertise in luring the visitor through a maze of vistas imbedded with optical temptations and surprises. Qi spoke of the true nature of the creative endeavour which, much like producing a painting, used no formula or logic but subjective and personal judgement based on feelings and vision.

The Theory of Landscape Painting

The seed of Chinese landscape gardening is deeply rooted in the school of landscape painting initiated and formed during the Wei and Jin dynasties. Landscape painting was given the title ‘Mother of Garden Art’ in recognition of the fact that the gardens and parks of ancient China were almost exclusively designed by painters. Records show that great painters such as Wang Wei of the Tang dynasty, the Song emperor Huizong, Ni Zan of the Yuan dynasty, Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) of the Ming dynasty, and Shi Tao (Dao Ji) (1641–c. 1717) of the Qing dynasty left behind masterpieces capturing the moods and structures of famous gardens of their times (Fig. 3.2). While their paintings served as the inspiration for garden designers, the artists themselves also participated in the design and construction of landscape gardens. Wang Wei’s villa at Wangchuan, a hermitage designed for his use, is recorded in a twenty-one scene horizontal scroll, while the ruins of a rockery peak in Yangzhou’s Pianshi Shanfang (Pianshi mountain house), designed by Shi Tao, are still visible today.

Inspired by nature’s beauty and moved by circumstantial sentimentality, the landscape artist approached garden design the same way he would execute a piece of landscape painting. These combined talents and the interplay between painting and the garden arts were best described by Ji, when he wrote in Yuan ye, ‘Treat the whitewashed wall as if it were paper, and the rocks as painting upon it’ (Ji, 1988: 109).

Rockery formation, in particular, was influenced the most by and benefited the most from painting, as Kan Duo, a modern-day scholar, commented in his foreword to the 1932 edition of Yuan ye: ‘Mountain-building in a garden derived its art from painting in that the painter uses brushes and ink, while the rockery artist employs rocks and earth as design media. Whereas the media they use are different, the principle of design is the same’ (Ji, 1932: 18). What the garden designers really learned from painters was, as Ji advised, to ‘study the natural cracks in the stone, and imitate the brushwork of the old masters’. In fact, at the height of garden art during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the most popular mountain-building approach
used modelling after the texture strokes (\textit{cun fa}) and pictorial compositions of the master painters of the Yuan dynasty, which immediately preceded those times [Fig. 3.3].

In the works of the Four Great Literati Painters of the Yuan dynasty, the mountains of Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), composed of smaller pieces of crystals, appear grandiose and heavy; the innumerable mountains and valleys by Wang Meng [c.1308–85] are misty and finely crafted. Ni Zan (1301–74) was famous for his depiction of withered trees in combination with bamboo and rocks. His composition was simple and sparse, yet it projected a strong sentiment of loneliness and sadness. The broad, misty, and remote mountain views by Wu Zhen (1285–1354) added to the rich palette of ideas and patterns from which garden-makers freely drew in their work.

In a more direct way, the principles of painting—specifically, the syntax of composition used in painting—have been successfully applied to garden design. Of particular interest to a visitor at a Chinese garden is yet another parallel between the creation of the garden and painting. In Chinese painting conventional formats include the vertical and horizontal, the handscroll, and the juxtaposition of individual frames. In addition, fan-shape, circular, octagonal, and other geometrical formats are also popular. Deliberately and thoughtfully, these geometrical forms are employed in the openings in architectural elements of the garden [Plate 10]. A garden can thus be experienced as a three-dimensional painting in which pictures are framed by a variety of devices, including windows [Fig. 3.4] and openings in the garden walls [Fig. 3.5]. As the visitor moves along a garden path, scenes will unfold in space and time much as if a handscroll were being unrolled (Plate 11). Another powerful principle often applied in Chinese painting is the use of scattered vanishing-points in perspec-
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3.5 'Moon gates' of various shapes used in Chinese gardens. Adapted from Liu Dunzhen, Classical Gardens of Suzhou.

3.6 An imaginary panorama of Daguan Yuan (Grand view garden), from Dream of the Red Chamber, provides a good example of the versatility of using the scattered vanishing-point technique in perspective drawing.

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tive drawing. As opposed to the Renaissance perspective technique in which one, two, or three vanishing-points are used in creating a picture, Chinese artists had the liberty of utilizing as many vanishing-points as they deemed necessary to depict a particular scene (Fig. 3.6). Using this versatile technique, also referred to as multiple vanishing-point perspective, Chinese artists were able to enjoy a complete freedom in content selection, sequencing, layout, and composition, based on their impressions and feelings about the task at hand. This freedom of movement, as well as the placement and sequencing of the 'pictures', greatly benefited the design of gardens and parks.

Selected Examples from Theories of Landscape Painting

Whereas explicit statements of the methods of garden design are a rarity in Chinese literature, theories of landscape painting abound and have guided garden design through the crucial stages of its long development. Many of the theoretical statements by painters have sounded equally useful to landscape gardeners, as they covered nearly all aspects of the composition of a garden. Some popular, instructional quotations and comments are illustrated below as examples.

Concerning composition

[In a landscape painting] there must be a 'host' and 'guest' in mountains, to and fro in water, tortuousness in hills, up and down in a mountain range, ...branching off in roads, revealing and concealing in streams, and high and low in curved river banks [Jing Hao, Shanshui riyao, An Outline of landscape painting].
Concerning process

[Getting ready to execute a painting in front of a blank sheet of rice paper, one should look up and down, left and right, within and beyond [the picture frame], toward you and away from you, when ‘a complete bamboo is in your chest’ [meaning having a well thought-out scheme], then start painting with ink and brush (Wang Yuanqi, Hualun shize, Ten rules of painting).

First establish the ‘host’ and ‘guest’ positions of the mountains. Next, decide on the ‘near’ and ‘far’ locations of the images. Then, place scenic objects between mountains and rivers so that they are up and down and in various heights [Wang Wei, Shenshui jue, The Secret formula of landscape painting].

Concerning mountains

Because of the prominent role rockery played in a garden scheme (Plate 12), a great deal of attention was paid to the study of its methods and techniques. Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715) included a lively discussion of the techniques of painting mountains in his Yuchuang manbi [A Rainy-day window-side chat], in which he compared the dynamic movement of a mountain range with that of a dragon. In a dragon head, he observed, there are slanting lines and levelled ones, whole and fragmented, continuous and broken, visible and hidden ones. Using that observation as the basis for an analogy, the ‘design’ of mountains in a painting could involve opening and closing, high and low, and also grouping, separation, gentle rippling, dramatic cliffing, peaking, and levelling.

In addition to the practice of making reference to the Four Great Literati Painters’ statements about styling concerns, as was outlined above, gardeners also learned from painters the perceptual aspects of mountains.

Concerning plants

Distant mountains show no base, distant trees show no roots, and distant boats show no hulls [only sails are visible].

The personification of plants also provided a source of design for sceneries of particular sentiment and significance. In most cases, plants were employed to symbolize the high character of a scholar–official or the unusual beauty of a woman. Stressing the importance of flowers as ingredients of a garden, Chen Fuyao, in Huaijing, declared, ‘If there is no good flower in a garden, it will be like a beautiful mansion without a gorgeous woman in it.’ Likewise,
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in Honglou meng every female character in the story has been assigned a flower as a symbol of her particular personality and beauty. To further highlight the ladies’ individuality in the overall garden setting, corresponding floral species were said to have been planted in the courtyards of their respective living quarters.

In terms of symbolic meanings, pine, bamboo, and winter-sweet are popularly personified as the Three Good Friends of Winter, due to their perseverance and unconquerable spirit in the face of freezing cold and hardship. Similarly, plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum are considered the Four Virtuous Gentlemen. The lotus flower is respected for its purity and integrity, because of its ability to survive the ‘muddy world’ without being contaminated. On the other hand, the peony, known as the King of Flowers, symbolizes wealth and prosperity with its brilliant colours and majestic appearance. These plants, assigned auspicious meanings, romantic sentiment, and didactic influence, are not merely individual plant materials useful for the ‘landscape’ of the eye. They are the essential ingredients for the ‘inscape’ of the mind [Murck and Fong, 1991: 361].

Concerning water

Mountains are valued for their range, water is valued for its source.

Streams follow mountains, and mountains are brought to life by streams.

For the mountain, streams are its veins, grass, its hair, and mists and clouds, its expressions [Guo Xi, Song dynasty].

Mist is best for mountain-and-river scenes, clearness is important for the borderline between forest and mountain range, terrain has

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its highs and lows, objects large and small, scenes near and far, deep and shallow. Mountains by nature are static but can be mobilized by the meandering water around them, rocks are basically stiff but will come alive when trees are added [Da Chongguang, Hua quan, Keys to successful painting].

For the scholar-gardener, his most cherished goal was to be able to use his creation as a vehicle to embody and convey to beholders a specific set of shi qing hua yi (literally, ‘poetic sentiments and artistic conceptions’). Poetry and landscape painting were found to be the most effective tools for achieving these goals. The qing (sentiment or feeling), best expressed in a poem, and the yi (conception or idea), to be found in a landscape painting, helped establish his ultimate design objectives for a particular garden scheme. As a result, an enormous wealth of hua lun (theories of painting), along with poems and prose from the past, became bounteous resources at his disposal.

A Design Process

The example of a design illustrated in Figure 3.7 was developed from the southern courtyard of the Zhan Yuan, an early Ming dynasty garden located in Nanjing. In this illustration, the design procedure does not necessarily reflect the actual process by which the Zhan Yuan was designed and built—no such document ever existed in Chinese garden history. It was reconstructed as an academic exercise to demonstrate what the design of a traditional Chinese garden would entail.

A: Once a site was selected, the first decision would invariably establish the siting of the main hall. Ideally, the main hall should be located in the northern section of the
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3.7 A garden design process reconstructed. Adapted from Jianzhu Shi, courtesy of Wang Boyang.

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the creation of a sense of boundlessness in space within a limited site.

D: A pond was created as a final touch for the composition. An indispensable element, water not only gave contrast to rockery and provided a mirrored image of scenic objects, it also gave life to and mobilized the static artificial hills in a garden scene.

E: A variety of latticed windows were used to lure the visitor into the garden's space. A moon gate and other geometric openings were employed to frame garden scenes and to create depth of space. As a rule, no dead end was allowed in any garden space. The climax of a garden was reached only by following a carefully designed sequence of 'hiding', 'leaking', and 'revealing' scenes of enchantment, as the visitor was never allowed to see the panoramic whole of the Chinese garden at the outset.

F: To complete the design, the final step was to hide the source of the pond and to conceal the footpath amidst mountains and valleys.

garden, facing south when possible and overlooking the best scenes that the garden would provide.

B: The garden proper was enclosed on all sides, usually by high walls, which were an integral part of the garden. Ancient trees were desirable and 'artificial hills' necessary. The heights of the main hall, trees, and rocks were decided [except for existing trees] to allow the proper 'borrowing', in Ji Cheng's terms, of scenes from above the garden itself.

C: Skilful subdivision of spaces would make a small garden appear large and, at the same time, provide varieties of scenery in the garden. Subdivision was the key to