

CHINESE GARDENS. ALLEGORICAL ECOLOGIES IN AN URBANIZING WORLD

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This contribution proposes to read the Chinese Garden as an architectural metaphor for a measured ecology. Featured by artificial groundworks, fishponds crossed by meandering passageways, verdure arrangements, halls, and pavilions for different purposes, gardens have developed over history as magnificent architectures tailored to build secluded and controlled realities. Building artificial grounds to simulate angles of the world is an attitude traceable in different cultures. A paradigmatic example was the construction of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, one of Paris' most important public parks. Engineer Charles Adolphe Alphand had the rock pickaxed for three years and, in 1867, gave Paris a picturesque garden imitating a mountain setting, complete with fake cliffs and an artificial waterfall. This episode witnesses the boundless confidence in man's ability to shape the habitat in which he lives at will. Such an attitude was aligned with unquestioned positivistic faiths in scientific and technological progress and envisioned no limits to the possibility of altering the morphology of sites and giving them the form of invented landscapes. It is crucial to pinpoint that these approaches never characterized the philosophy of Chinese gardens, which, following the precepts of traditional philosophies, have been constructed to reproduce miniaturized angles of the world permeated by harmony between natural and artificial elements. As clearly defined in their borders, the gardens had to evoke the interplay of correspondences, the cosmic energy animating the world, and benevolently oriented it via cosmology and rites (Jullien 2014, p. 119). Moreover, it is worth reminding that, as in classical *shanshui* paintings[¶], they went beyond depicting or confronting reality as it was, projecting

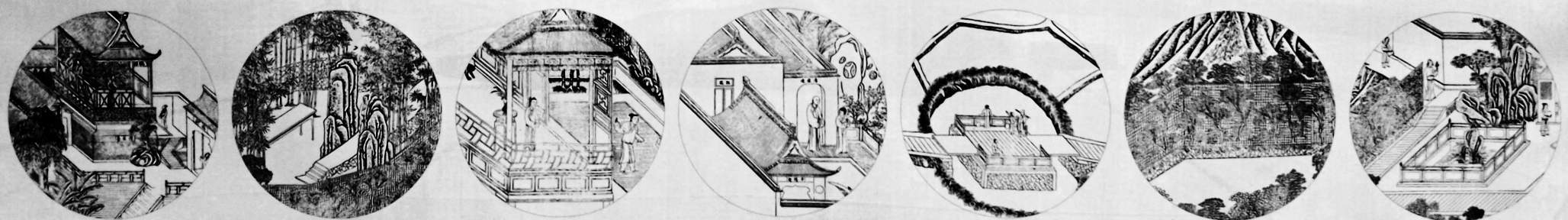
Chinese literati's idealization of relationships between human and nature, through the attainment of visual and spiritual harmonies via the composition of a timeless image of nature (Chu 2021, p. 2).

Indeed, their picturesque environment goes far beyond the mere imitation of nature and embodies the complex network of correspondences. The exhibition curated by Fang Zhenning *Stroll in HuanCui Tang* exposed at the 2017 SUSAS (Shanghai Urbas Space Art Season)[⌘], which represented the panorama of a notable scroll from the Ming Dynasty in Anhui style, is a striking example of the ethical and aesthetical values imbued in Chinese gardens portraying both a place for pleasure and a metaphor for living in the world. Unlike some other cultural genealogies marked by cultural fractures, Chinese historical culture has been able to absorb contrasts and dramatic changes along its evolutionary path.

Poster of Stroll in HuanCui Tang exhibition curated by Fang Zhenning at the 2017 Shanghai Urbas Space Art Season, which represented the panorama of a notable scroll from the Ming Dynasty in Anhui style. The poster emphasizes how gardens' architecture is used as a tool to frame, contemplate, and live off the landscape. Photo by Gerardo Sempredon, 2017.



CHINESE GARDEN / HUAN CUI TANG



As an expression of this striking resilience's capacity, the Chinese garden has been a spatial entity crossing time, space, and meaning, substantially preserving its tangible connotations and principles, intimately connected to intangible forms of art, poetry *in primis*. Indeed, a large part of traditional Chinese architecture can be understood as a device for observing the landscape, a cosmos animated by vital forces integrating anthropic and pristine elements, where gardens have usually embodied miniaturized reproductions of classic landscapes. Along many meticulous descriptions of Chinese gardens, one will surely realize the cultural substratum that has fed the will to create exquisite spaces for the secluded *otium* of bureaucrats working in urban administrative centers, always eager to evoke the breath of the *qi* across an allegory of traditional landscape.

The balance between anthropic and wild signs is the key to understanding the distinctiveness of Chinese gardens. In regard to this, Paolillo annotated that from the Qing Dynasty, the last before the fall of the empire, architectural elements have increased in presence to the detriment of naturalness. In his words, buildings started not seeming any more elements placed within landscaped microcosmos but frames or borders of the space inside (Paolillo 1996, p. 127). The meaning of spaces enclosed by architecture, like courtyard houses, has always epitomized fundamental aspects of life, such as the connection with ancestors or Heaven. Architecture as physical and built thresholds between different domains, such as a street and an interior of the house, or even simply two separate rooms, has increasingly shaped the spatial experience one encounters in daily routines. The open space inside buildings, creating pauses in the movement, has stimulated a vertical tension between the ground and the celestial sky, characterizing the domestic realm where life could unfold under the “watchful eye of Heaven's arch” (Ruan 2021, p. 19).

THE TWIST OF AN URBAN WORLD

China's tremendous transformations over the last decades have influenced the perceptions and understandings of human-nature relationships in its environmental and perceptive attributes. Gardens have not been immune to such transitions, and I suggest that, as controlled ecologies, they open to new interpretative frameworks.

The domain of art, especially when explored with provocative contents and forms, has provided new interpretative keys to decipher traditional meanings in fast-evolving contemporaneity.

Example of architectural elements framing space's experience and verdure arrangement in the classical garden of Suzhou Canglang Pavilion, also known as Great Wave Pavilion. Photo by Gerardo Semprebón, 2018.



I consider the work of two Chinese figures to suggest the twists Chinese gardens as allegorical ecologies are undergoing in the wake of today's reality spatial configuration.

In 2014 Artist Yang Yongliang produced digital reinterpretations of Song Dynasty master paintings, turning the classical and harmonious balance between pristine lands and human presence into tremendously-detailed concrete jungles featuring contemporary Chinese megacities. One needs to get closer to realize that the overall picture, the classic landscape by Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountain and Streams* (*Xishan xinglu tu*, ca. 1000), results from a meticulous digital assemblage of images of high-rise buildings, construction cranes, and demolished sites. Yang used images of architectures as brushstrokes so that, for instance, mountains are mosaics of skyscrapers and streams are collages of packed motorways. Yang's work has been acknowledged to reflect many of the controversial aspects of Chinese urbanization (Wang 2017), also being defined as a "toxic sublime" rendering of ongoing predatory practices toward the environment (Puppini 2019). The ambiguity embedded in his almost romantic, in the sense of pan-like feeling, attitude unfolds in both the will to minutely describe urban stacking and devouring real-estate machine and synthetically evoke intense emotions at a glance, which becomes the engine for speculating and questioning the ethical, aesthetic, and contemplative outcomes of the current developmental model and its relations with the environment. Beyond grasping the dramatic transition of Chinese land, Yang's art remarks that if, on one side, urban development made life thrive in cities, on the other, it also caged these lives, illuminating the twist of forms and meanings permeating historical and contemporary landscapes in China. This shift, which has given life to differentiated exposing modalities, has been corroborated by the advancement of modern artistic techniques, primarily related to the digital production of images and other contents, which contributed to emphasizing the social, political, and environmental dimension of landscape representation (Chu 2012), with particular reference to the Ecological Civilization ideology (Semprebbon 2021). Even though human figures appear absent in Yang's composition, suggesting a remarkable gap from the ancient painting scroll, nonetheless, it may be inferred that "human interference is at once omnipresent and invisible" (Tan 2016, p. 227).

What is revealed is also a relatively connivance to what *de facto* may be assumed as a new canon of classics: the uncontrolled phenomenon of excessive urbanization as an antagonist to nature.

According to Ortells-Nicolau, Chinese development em-

bodies the connotations of a "ruination" process driven by land speculation and economic growth (Ortells-Nicolau 2017). For Kiu Wai Chu, the modern world recomposed into classical iconographies represents people's nostalgia for a lost benevolent connection with nature and tradition (Chu 2012). Nevertheless, the anthropogenic pressure on the environment also mirrors the deliberate plan of land transformation that may represent the contemporary ideology of classics, provocatively rendered by Yang with traditional iconographies. The inherent effect of the estrangement of Yang's work's first impression triggers further and deeper reflections on spatializations and perceptive impacts of social, economic, and political forces. Overcoming binary relationships like past and present, nature and city, tradition and modernity, his *Artificial Wonderlands* embrace a more nuanced dimension suspended between ephemeral and substantial, restful and threatening, organic and mechanical, generic and peculiar, perceptual and conceptual (Mickle 2016).

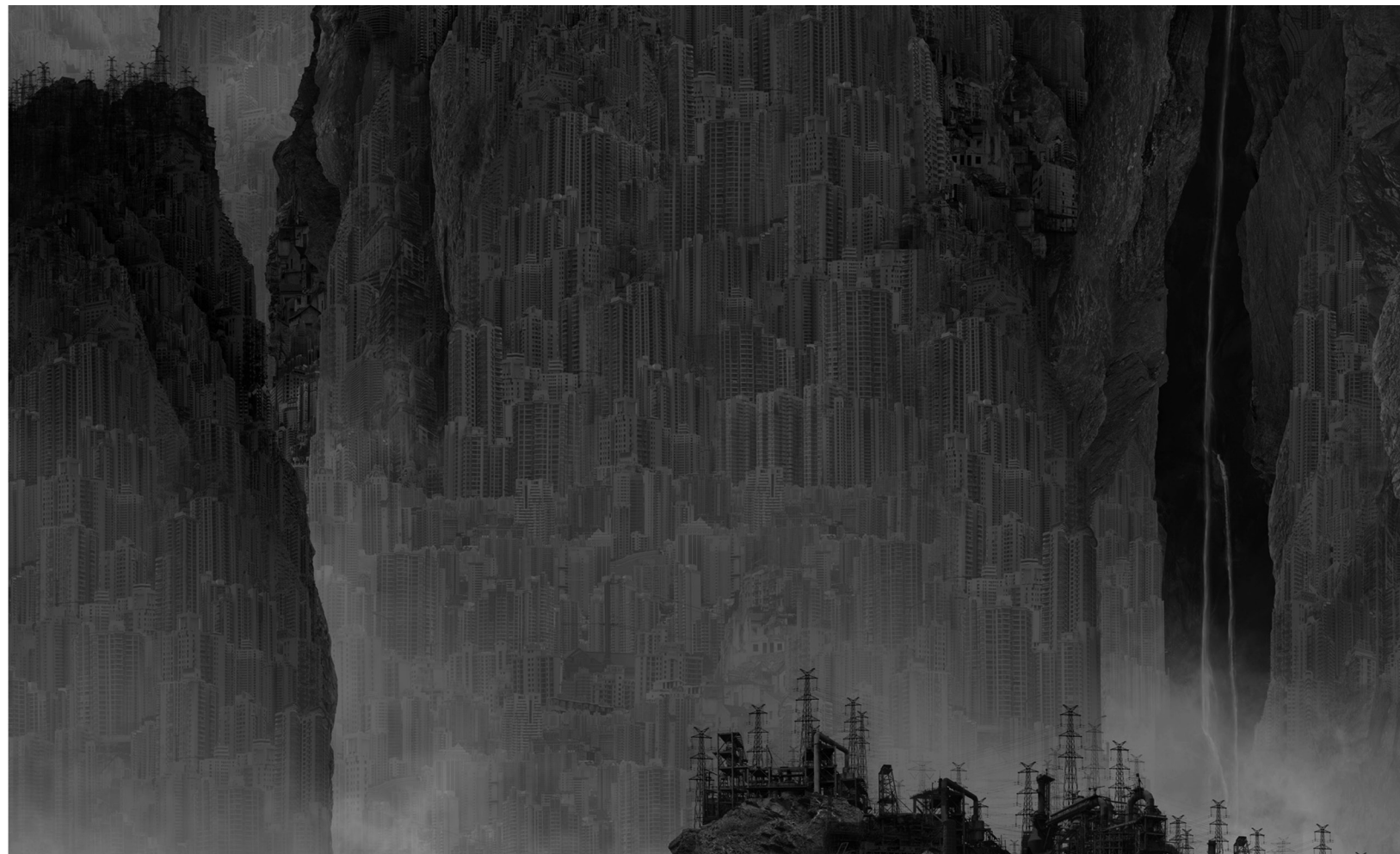
The semantic backflip reaches a climax with Ma Yansong's manifesto for Shanshui City, the utmost urban ideology reinterpreting traditional lost landscapes in contrast to the commodification of urban realities, to the "monuments of capital and power" (Ma 2014, p. 26) and to the soulless idea of buildings as "machines for living" (Ma 2014, p. 28). Here as well, it is crucial to remark on Ma's position in regard to Chinese classics' ecology. Describing Chinese classical gardens, he wrote that

what makes them a treasured cultural heritage is their representation of a distinct worldview in which humanity and nature coexist in harmony, not the fact that they happen to meet certain ecological and environmental criteria [...] the only true sustainability lies in a building's spiritual and cultural significance for residents and the community (Ma 2014, p. 46).

For him, *shanshui* is an "image of the natural world created within the subconscious to act as consolation and compensation for the struggles of political life" (Li 2014, p. 224), which he upscales at an urban and territorial scale to forge a new type of poetic living. On these bases, Ma's critique of the unquestioned application of environmental technologies moves on the grounds of the convincement that buildings and cities can offer renewed spiritual and emotional connections between humans and nature within an urban setting that is not necessarily green. The suspicion he has nurtured toward green as a panacea for all ills puts him in an eccentric position compared to the mainstream urban visions for the future of cities. Take, for instance, Stefano Boeri Architetti's Liuzhou Forest City¹¹, an upscaled

Yang Yongliang, *Travelers among Mountain and Streams*, from "Artificial Wonderland II" series (2014).

On the left is the entire artwork, and on the right is a zoom.
Courtesy of Yang Yongliang.



development of the celebrated Vertical Forest prototype, where the image of the new city derives directly from the accurate definition of greeneries on otherwise generic buildings. Another example we can cite is SOM's Urban Sequoia¹¹, the project for a skyscraper able to sequester carbon with the help of algae. In this case, a city made of buildings working like machines will implement green materials to remediate pollution in a metabolic way. SOM rejects picturesque fake figurations either of forests or natural and cultural landscapes. Ma's position appears more inclined to an allegorical reconnection with folkloristic wisdom far from an idealized imitation of the past but able to trace a contemporary Chinese identity independent from foreign models. In his words, Shanshui City

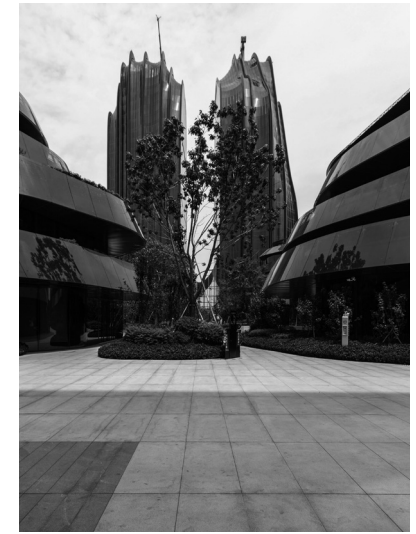
is not simply an eco-city, or a garden-city, nor does it imply modeling the city's architecture on natural forms such as mountains. Rather, it represents humanity's affinity for the natural world, and our quest for inner fulfillment, as expressed in philosophies of the East (Ma 2014, p. 20).

He often compared this idea with Louis Kahn's Salk Institute, which is a place without vegetation but intimately connected with nature, because for him "what we see is [...] ourselves resonating within the landscape of the mind" (Ma 2014, p. 65). One of the first applications of Shanshui City is the Chaoyang Park Plaza in Beijing. The two towers soar on the skyline and, from a distance, reflect on the water of nearby lakes. On the ground, dwarfed buildings reproduce a small-scale environment equipped with greenery and resting spaces protected from the bordering urban chaos. In Ma's conception, this composite of allegorical mountains, rocks, and waters triggers connections with the traditional values of *shanshui* paintings, latent but forged in the soul of the Chinese. With this in mind, we have to look at his "Fake Hills," a project that "is not a direct representation of a series of hills, nor it is a mathematically generated abstraction. It is an emotional act; its origin lies in affection" (Ma 2014, p. 174). Ma's attitude, in the end, is not so far from that envisioned by builders of the past committed to hosting emperors' tombs in reshaped hills, underground mausoleums, or other artificially made landscapes.

THE GARDEN AS AN ALLEGORICAL ELEMENT OF RESISTANCE

Augustin Berque listed four criteria for the existence of landscape as such. First, linguistic representations, or one or two words to say landscape. Second, literary representations, oral or written, that praise or describe a landscape's beauty.

MAD Architects, *Chaoyang Park Plaza*, Beijing (2017). Top left: street view between the "mountains" and the "waters"; top right: on the ground floor, smaller pavilions and greeneries evoke a more controlled human scale environment; bottom: viewed from Jingshan hill, the "mountains" lose their evocative meaning. Photo by Gerardo Semprebón, 2018.



Third, pictorial representations that have the landscape as a theme. Fourth, representations through gardens proving an aesthetic assessment of nature (not gardens for subsistence). He pointed out that such criteria can be found in many societies, but only in properly landscape societies are all four criteria (Berenson 1953, p. 186). Alain Roger found that the Chinese society was the only one deserving this title of landscape society before also Westerners ones started manipulating the four criteria in the XV century (Roger 2009, p. 41). Such an enduring and fertile tradition is undoubtedly a priceless legacy, yet it poses questions on the role it can play in present and future eras. If, in the past, gardens mirrored and reproduced an idealized relationship between humans and nature fixed in classic landscape paintings and Chinese gardens, what do they signify in the contemporary milieu?

On one side, we have seen how Yang Yongliang's reinterpretation of classic paintings became both a way to denounce aesthetic and ecological concerns that belong to a collective dimension suspended between the nostalgic regret of the lost emotive relation with nature and the acquiescence to a new urbanized everyday indifferent to both environment and landscape. On the other side, we have Ma Yansong's skeptical position on technocratic attitudes toward the construction of any living setting. His point has assonance with Alain Rogers's critique of "ecolocacy" as a design attitude solely concerned with respecting the *environment* and not the *landscape* (Roger 2009, p. 106). The initially-mentioned pursuit of earthly paradises as envisioned by ancient builders is today more relevant than ever, as the beautiful words used by Alvar Aalto remind us,

the ultimate goal of the architect (...) is to create a paradise.

Every house, every product of architecture (...) should be a fruit of our endeavor to build an earthly paradise for people. ¹

If, on one side, the term paradise enlarges the extent of the aesthetic experience, evoking the peacefulness and delight of all senses, on the other, it suggests the possibility of salvation and redemption whose values rooted in the past may be reconsidered at present. If we accept this condition, Chinese gardens are not only priceless cultural assets or spectacular tourist destinations but also legacies of a precedent civilization and elements of resilience in a world moving toward uncontested urbanization.



M. Foucault, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, in N. Leach (edited by) *Rethinking Architecture; A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 354.

山水, *shanshui* is the word addressing classic landscape painting in mandarin. It is composed of two characters, 山 *shan* meaning mountain, and 水 *shui*, meaning water. Alain Roger suggests considering also the word 风景, composed by the character 风, *feng*, meaning wind, and 景, *jing*, meaning scene. Roger suggests that *fengjing* means the atmosphere of the landscape and *shanshui* its elements, since these two terms may indicate both the object and the representation of the landscape. See: A. Roger, *Breve trattato sul paesaggio*, Sellerio editore, Palermo 2009, p. 49.



See: <https://www.susas.com.cn/2017susas/EN-phone/index.html> [accessed 8 August 2023].



See: <https://www.stefanoboeriarchitetti.net/en/project/liuzhou-forest-city/> [accessed 25 July 2023].



See: <https://www.som.com/news/at-cop26-som-unveils-urban-sequoia-a-proposal-to-transform-the-built-environment-into-a-network-for-absorbing-carbon/> [accessed 25 July 2023].



Lecture given at the Swedish city planners' meeting in Malmo in 1957. See: A. Aalto, *The Architect's Conception for Paradise*, in G. Schildt (edited by), *Alvar Aalto Sketches*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts and London 1978, p. 158.

The reality of contemporary landscapes classics. Left foreground: the garden of the Confucian Temple in Shanghai; left background: the pressing generic city; right: Nanjing, the new “classic” landscape. Photos by Gerardo Semprebon, 2019 and 2018.

