

# Cultivating Orientalism

Although the transplantation of Chinese gardens to the Western world over the past few decades might appear far removed from the topic of Edward Said's classic study, the cultural essentialism of which it partakes shares much with Said's original conception of Orientalism. But this is a form of Orientalism in which the power relationship has shifted dramatically.

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IN JUNE 1664, John Evelyn took an opportunity to view "a Collection of rarities" shipped from China by Jesuit missionaries and bound for Paris. Among the astonishing sights "as in my life I had not seen" were rhinoceros horns, rubies, and "Divers Drougs that our Drougists & physicians could make nothing of." An "exquisitely polished" type of paper, "exceedingly glorious & pretty to looke on" caught his eye, while especially remarkable were the "Glorious Vests, wrought & embroidered on cloth of Gold, but with such lively colours, as for splendor & vividnesse we have nothing in Europe approaches."<sup>1</sup>

The material manifestations of Sino-Western exchange have long been a source of fascination for Western viewers, and if the success of last year's exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is anything to go by, that fascination remains as strong as ever. *China: Through the Looking Glass*, the result of a collaboration between the Fashion and Asian Art departments at the Met, opened on 7 May 2015 and by late August had already become the most viewed exhibition in the history of the Costume Institute, eclipsing attendance numbers for the hugely popular Alexander McQueen display of 2011. Self-consciously repositioning fashion within the discourse of Orientalism, curator Andrew Bolton was explicit from the outset that his exhibition was "not about China per se but about a China that exists as a collective fantasy." Thus it proposes a "less politicized and more positivistic examination of Orientalism as a locus of infinite and unbridled creativity," which, Bolton argues, "instead of silencing the other ... becomes an active, dynamic two-way conversation."<sup>2</sup>

The curious life of the Chinese garden in the modern West, of which the Met's very own Astor Court is a notable example, both supports and challenges Bolton's reconceptualization of Orientalism. It suggests that while the power to define and represent the Chinese garden in the West has changed hands, the result has been quite the opposite of "infinite and unbridled creativity."

## Early Chinese gardens in the West

The garden as a key site of cultural exchange between East and West has a long history. Sir William Temple's (1628-1699) praise of the designed irregularity of Chinese gardens was highly influential to a generation of scholars, and precipitated an intense interest in Chinese gardens and garden architecture that peaked during the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> A visitor's record of 1738 describes "a house built on piles, after the manner of the Chinese, odd & Pretty enough" at Stowe, while a 'Chinese House' appears on a Woburn estate map of the same year.<sup>4</sup> Chinese garden features were in place at Marybone House and at Shugborough Estate by 1748. By 1757 the style had already become all too clichéd, as Robert Lloyd's (1733-1764) poetic send-up of that year suggests: "The traveller with amazement sees / A temple, Gothic, or Chinese, / With many a bell, and tawdry rag on, / And crested with a sprawling dragon; / A wooden arch is bent astride / A ditch of water, four foot wide, / With angles, curves, and zigzag lines, / From Halfpenny's exact designs."<sup>5</sup>

Eighteenth-century observers were generally aware that such garden structures were cultural hybrids. One visitor to the 'Chinese House' at Old Windsor described it as "half-gothic, half attack, half Chinese, and completely fribble."<sup>6</sup> A correspondent to *The World* in 1753 had it that:

*According to the present prevailing whim, every thing is Chinese, or in the Chinese taste: or, as it is sometimes more modestly expressed, partly after the Chinese manner ... [W]ithout-doors so universally has it spread, that every gate to a cow-yard is in T's and Z's and every hovel for the cows has bells hanging at the corners....[O]n a moderate computation, not one in a thousand of all the stiles, gates, rails, pales, chairs, temples, chimney-pieces, &c. &c. &c. which are called Chinese, has the least resemblance to any thing that China ever saw... [O]ur Chinese ornaments are not only of our own manufacture, like our French silks and our French wines, but, what has seldom been attributed to the English, of our own invention.<sup>7</sup>*

Granted, not everyone was content to lose himself in the fantasy. The stated objective of *Designs of Chinese Buildings* (1757) by William Chambers (1723-1796) was to "put a stop to the extravagancies that daily appear under the name of Chinese."<sup>8</sup> But Chambers' designs disappointed his contemporaries

precisely for their lack of exoticism. As Oliver Impey has observed, "people knew exactly what they wanted a 'Chinese' building to be, light, frivolous, immediately pretty and gaily coloured, and they had no use for Chambers' solemn pronouncements on inaccuracy."<sup>9</sup>

## Chinese nature

In later accounts, Chinese gardens become entangled with ideas about racial qualities of the Chinese people, a link made explicitly in J. C. Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Gardening* (1834), in which "Chinese taste in gardening...partakes of the general character of the people, and is characterised by their leading feature, peculiarity."<sup>10</sup> A curator at the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) could similarly claim in 1872 that "a Chinaman can recognize and appreciate the beauties of a landscape, and will so order his building that its lines fall in with those already existing in nature; but he is incapable of the higher art by which western peoples have imposed new lines on the horizon and made surrounding nature harmonise with their conceptions."<sup>11</sup> Here the issue of taste has now been entirely removed from the analysis. The Chinese designer is *incapable* of the higher (Western) art, which is unproblematically presented as the normative standard to which he must aspire. Twentieth-century accounts have tended to make the same implicit (or explicit) association. A landscape architect could observe admiringly in 1964 that "Chinese restraint in gardening is inborn, and Chinese patience we can scarcely apprehend, much less attain; for it endures from generation to generation, contentedly watching a lone plum tree grow from youth to maturity and from strength to age."<sup>12</sup>

Such statements are now all too obviously part of the system of knowledge-production we have come to know as 'Orientalism' following the publication of Edward Said's highly-influential work in 1978.<sup>13</sup> Whether in awestruck admiration or in casual dismissal, the garden is co-opted into the service of a narrative that places a traditional, static, passive East in opposition to a modern, dynamic, active West. Here Oriental culture stands in opposition to Occidental history – and the Chinese garden thus becomes 'timeless'. This timelessness allows, for example, the art historian Hugh Honour to use (in 1961) a nineteenth-century description to discuss an eighteenth-century garden, for, he observes, "few changes in the style of gardening are likely to have been wrought within the space of a century in China."<sup>14</sup>

## The authentic garden

The opening of the Astor Court in 1981 marked the beginning of a new phase in the global dissemination of Chinese garden culture that has shown no signs of abating. After close consultation with the eminent Chinese garden historian Chen Congzhou

(1918-2000) in the late 1970s, the design team had proposed that the 'Late Spring Abode' (*Dianchun yi*) in the western section of the 'Garden of the Master of Nets' (*Wangshi yuan*) in Suzhou be recreated at the New York site. A long-defunct imperial ceramic kiln was reopened, a special team of loggers dispatched to the province of Sichuan to source appropriate timber, and a full-scale prototype constructed in Suzhou. The garden was then meticulously assembled in New York early in 1980 by a team of Chinese experts, after a ritual exchange of hardhats with their American counterparts, before being officially opened to the public in June 1981.

As if anticipating the "locus of infinite and unbridled creativity" that Bolton wants us to see at the Met, Chen Congzhou claimed that the opening of the Astor Court "served to promote the ever deepening trend towards the intermingling of the garden cultures of China and the rest of the world."<sup>15</sup> In fact, although the number of Chinese gardens constructed in Western cities has grown exponentially and continues to rise, an ever-increasing emphasis on cultural authenticity has come to dominate their construction and display. From Vancouver to Dunedin, Chinese gardens are now routinely constructed by Chinese labourers using 'authentic' techniques and materials, and their proud claims suggest a sense of rivalry in this regard. The construction of the Astor Court had been characterised by "rigorous adherence to traditional techniques" according to its accompanying press release.<sup>16</sup> The 'Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden' in Vancouver is "an authentic representation of an age-old garden tradition" and "the first of its kind outside of China." The 'Lan Su Chinese Garden' in Portland was "built by Chinese artisans from Suzhou and is the most authentic Chinese garden outside of China."<sup>17</sup>

From a historical perspective, this 'authentic Chinese garden' is a rather more problematic concept than such statements would suggest. Like those of Europe, late-imperial Chinese gardens, whether constructed or imagined, responded in their designs to specific social and political circumstances and to specific local contexts. The export process has tended to privilege one particular type – the so-called 'scholar' garden of Ming-dynasty Suzhou – at the expense of other regional variations that once characterised a much richer garden heritage than the one we are now able to behold. The process of mutual reinforcement by which this type of garden has become the traditional Chinese garden in both China and the West has been astonishingly rapid. Yet most 'classical' gardens even in Suzhou are in fact nineteenth- or twentieth-century constructions, and there is little evidence to suggest that that city's unchallenged reputation as garden city *par excellence* predates the twentieth century. The pervasive image of the garden as sanctuary for the lone, impoverished scholar contemplating nature does not stand up to recent critical scholarship by Craig Clunas and others.<sup>18</sup> Poor men simply did not own gardens in late-imperial China, and garden owners knew the social value of their properties too well to cloister themselves away.

Most significantly, the only known garden design treatise from the late-Ming period, *The Craft of Gardens* (*Yuan ye*) by Ji Cheng (b. 1582), repeatedly stresses that a designer "cannot stick too closely to convention," as "skill in landscape design is shown in the ability to 'follow' (*yin*) and 'borrow from' (*jie*) the existing scenery and lie of the land." For Ji, "you must use whatever structure is appropriate to the particular circumstances, and not confine yourself to a single design."<sup>19</sup> One can only imagine what he might have made of the idea of meticulously reassembling a garden on the other side of the world.

Below:  
The 'Chinese House',  
c.1748. Shugborough,  
Staffordshire  
(photograph by  
the author).







### Appropriating Orientalism

In her 1952 autobiographical novel *A Many Splendored Thing*, Han Suyin has her British protagonist reflect on the relationship between tourism, culture and preservation:

*Anglo-Saxons are muddled with wishful thinking about your country. To us it is still a wonder land of hidden wealth and subtle wisdom. We suspect that it may not be true, but we go on hoping, for we are sentimentalists. Our tourist minds are intent on preserving old customs in other countries, exotic manifestations of natives of other lands. We like to dream of Eastern nations drawn up in picturesque pageant, a perpetual durbar, wrapped in gold brocade and gorgeous embroidery and charming rags, practising old magic dances by moon and torchlight; and especially being very photogenic. We say with complete disregard of them as human beings: "How awful of you to give up those dear old customs, that wonderful family system we admire so much (since we did not have to live under its yoke). It's not you we want, but your traditions, your culture, your civilization." We are museum-haunted, collectors of a glass-encased past labelled: 'Do not touch'.*<sup>20</sup>

It is tempting to view the entire project of transplanting Chinese gardens to the West as an Orientalist preservation exercise, with the implied message that We can safeguard your cultural heritage better than You can. Indeed, what could be more reminiscent of nineteenth-century Orientalist practice than the placement of a Chinese garden within a Western museum? In this context it serves as a souvenir, carefully labelled and categorized, an object that "allow[s] the tourist to appropriate, consume, and thereby 'tame' the cultural other" in Susan Stewart's thoughtful phrase.<sup>21</sup>

But in the case of the Chinese garden, the Western authority to view, represent and create the Oriental 'Other' in a Saidian sense can no longer be taken for granted. Consider the anxiety expressed by a New Zealander involved in the creation of the Dunedin Chinese garden in 2008:

*I was very concerned that we would do something that was amateurish and that would reflect European ideas of Oriental gardens. And, I knew enough about Chinese gardens [to know] that no European could ever build a Chinese garden. There is far too much history, far too much culture that we simply don't understand that goes into the[ir] making.*<sup>22</sup>

This statement comes close to the "delicious surrender to the unremitting exoticism of total illegibility" that David Porter observes of the eighteenth-century passion for chinoiserie.<sup>23</sup>

Above: The Astor Court. 1981. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (courtesy of the museum)

The Chinese garden, and by implication Chinese culture more generally, has once again become ancient, mysterious, unknowable.

Instead, Chinese garden culture has now been entirely reclaimed by Chinese actors, a process that signifies not powerlessness but rather China's newly-acquired confidence within a global context. The dramatic economic transformation of the People's Republic of China since 1978 and its re-engagement with the Western world after a period of relative isolation has seen something called 'traditional Chinese culture' become a marketable commodity once more. The Chinese state increasingly presents itself as guardian of the nation's culture, and in this context, 'classical gardens of Suzhou' have become an authenticated category of cultural heritage, with nine being added to the UNESCO World Heritage List between 1997 and 2000.<sup>24</sup> As the landscape photographer Zhong Ming observed in 1991, "it has taken the attention of the West to bring home to contemporary Chinese the need to preserve historic gardens and to restore them in an authentic way, rather than simply rebuilding either in a contemporary idiom or with an unscholarly contemporary idea of what a classical garden should look like."<sup>25</sup>

As Said described it, one of the key components of nineteenth-century Orientalist practice was cultural essentialism, or the ahistorical tendency to represent societies by a set of internally-coherent cultural characteristics "bound together by a spirit, genius, Klima, or national idea."<sup>26</sup> The self-Orientalizing process that led to the invention of the 'traditional' Chinese garden in the late twentieth century is perhaps not adequately explained by Said's one-directional model, but the end product – an elegant stereotype – is not a million miles away from his original Oriental fantasy.

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