On the Eighteenth-Century English Misreading of the Chinese Garden

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The year 1692 saw in London the production of an opera entitled *The Fairy Queen*, which contained a Chinese interlude:

While the stage is darkened a single entry is danced. Then a symphony is played; after the scene is suddenly illuminated, and discovers a transparent prospect of a Chinese garden, the architecture, the trees, the plants, the fruit, the birds, the beasts, quite different from what we have in this part of the world. It is terminated by an arch, through which is seen other arches with close arbors, and a row of trees to the end of the view. Over it is a hanging garden, which rises by several ascents to the top of the house; it is bounded on either side with pleasant bowers, various trees, and numbers of strange birds flying in the air, on the top of the platform is a fountain, throwing up water, which falls into a large basin (Honour 77).

This setting is interesting to us in several ways. The designer was no doubt a zealous experimentalist in what he thought to be an exotic form of beauty. He sincerely believed that what he brought to the stage would be a charming presentation contributing tremendously to the success of the play. Indeed, both the "Chinese garden" and the opera itself were favorably received by the audience. However, the designer's knowledge of China hardly exceeded some obscure and unsubstantial conceptions. Knowing virtually nothing of the fauna and flora of that remote country, he could not commit himself to any definitive descriptions of the plants, the birds and the beasts in his "Chinese garden," and had to seek refuge in such vague and ambiguous epithets as "strange" and "different." In the passage quoted above, the only image one can visualize is probably the fountain, which, ironically, is typical not of a Chinese garden but of a European one.

Of course, to accuse the designer of a willful misrepresentation of the Chinese art of gardening would be beside the point, for the...
setting of the garden, as people would usually expect of an interlude, was intended to be an amusement rather than an earnest imitation of any artistic model. However, the production of this setting may be taken as a herald to the craze for things Chinese in the English landscape gardening of the next century, which, although no longer a joking matter like the garden on the stage, was similarly based on an epistemological uncertainty and a conceptual distortion of the Oriental form of art.

When Charles II returned to England in 1660 he brought with him memories of the glories of Versailles. Under the strong influence of the royal taste, the French style quickly established itself on this side of the Channel. However, even when the French style was still in its heyday and its dominance remained unchallenged, Sir William Temple, a prominent English writer, was already talking of another form of beauty in Chinese gardening:

Among us, the beauty of building and planting is placed chiefly in some certain proportions, symmetries, or uniformities; our walks and our trees ranged so as to answer one another, and at exact distances. The Chinese scorn this way of planting, and say, a boy that can tell a hundred, may plant walks and trees in straight lines, and over-against one another, and to what length and extent he pleases. But their greatest reach of imagination is employed in contriving figures, where the beauty shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed; and though we have hardly any notion of this sort of beauty, yet they have a particular word to express it, and, where they find it hit their eye at first sight, they say the sharawadgi is fine or admirable, or any such expression of esteem (Temple I,186).

Temple, however, did not call on English gardeners to abandon the formal style, which he still considered the best for the Europeans, because the Chinese garden, although it had "more beauty than any others," was "too hard an achievement for any common hands." According to him, it would be too risky for English gardeners to engage in the Chinese adventure. "There may be more honour if they succeed well, yet there is more dishonour if they fail, and it is twenty to one they will" (186). However, this admonition of the circumspect statesman was only to be set aside by people of the next generation. In his Spectator paper
of June 25, 1712, Joseph Addison, whose allegiance to the neoclassical principles did not prevent him from having a good eye for “beauty without order,” sets the formal garden in opposition to nature. “There is generally in nature something more grand and august, than what we meet with in the curiosities of art” (VI, 67). Then he proceeds to talk of the Chinese garden as a model for subordinating art to nature:

Writers, who have given us an account of China, tell us the inhabitants of that country laughed at the plantations of our Europeans, which are laid out by the rule and line; because, they say, any one may plant trees in equal rows and uniform figures. They chose rather to show a genius in works of this nature, and therefore always conceal the art by which they direct themselves.

Indeed, in praising the Chinese, Addison’s language sounds much like that of Temple’s, but Addison was much more critical of the formal garden than his precursor. In contrast to the Chinese garden, the rigid forms and regular order of the English garden now appeared to him deplorable artificialities. “Our English gardeners,” complains the essayist, “instead of humouring nature, love to deviate from it as much as possible. Our trees rise in cones, globes, and pyramids. We see the marks of the scissors upon every plant and bush” (VI, 68).

Thus, the Chinese garden became for Addison an ideal for the English practitioners to aim at. As if afraid that people were not clear enough about what his ideal garden would look like, he went out of the way to describe “my garden,” an imaginary one, of course, in another Spectator essay a few months later. The garden was completely free of any discernible vestige of art, so that a stranger who lost his way there would “look upon it as a natural wilderness, and one of the uncultivated parts of our country.” “There is the same irregularity on my plantations, which run into as great a wildness as their natures will permit” (VII, 14).

In his essay of June 25, 1712, Addison had modestly conceded that “I do not know whether I am singular in my opinion, but, for my part, I would rather look upon a tree in all its luxuriance and diffusion of boughs and branches, than when it is thus cut and trimmed into a mathematical figure” (VI, 68). He was soon to be proved far from being singular, for he quickly found a powerful ally in the prominent poet Alexander Pope, who expressed similar ideas in one of his Guardian essays (Clifford 129). Pope agreed
with Addison that a garden should be a faithful copy of nature, but, unlike the essayist who cultivated his ideal garden only with his imaginative pen, the poet quickly put his ideas into practice. In 1719, when he moved into his villa at Twickenham, he made a little garden himself by the house, which he meant to be an example to show the true relationship between art and nature (Clifford 134).

With Addison and Pope as its exponents, the new kind of gardening rapidly spread all over the country and superseded the formal garden as the dominant style. The geometrical rules of proportion and symmetry were subverted, straight avenues were replaced by serpentine paths, and groves that “seem green chests set upon poles” (Walpole 16) gave way to trees and bushes in their natural luxuriance. By Charles Bridgeman, the designer of the garden of Stowe, was invented a new method of enclosure, which was simply a ditch or a sunk fence one could not see until he was quite close to it. This was called “ha-ha,” a term supposedly derived from the exclamation of the surprised viewer (Walpole 42). The purpose of this invention was to conceal the boundaries between the garden and the open country, and to create a deceptive impression upon the viewer that the garden was but part of the natural landscape. Later in the century, Horace Walpole ardentely hailed “ha-ha” as the “capital stroke, the leading step to all that has followed,” because by dismantling garden walls “the contiguous ground of the park without the sunk fence was to be harmonized with the lawn within” and therefore “nature was taken into the plan” (42,43).

Following Bridgeman there was William Kent, who was often regarded as the presiding genius of the natural gardening. Sent by his patron the Earl of Burlington, Kent had stayed in Italy for a few years learning Italian painting and gardening, and was even addressed by his countrymen as “the Signor” (Clifford 136), but from Horace Walpole’s description of Kent’s gardens we may be certain that they were closer to Addison’s imagined garden of nature than to the Italian type:

Adieu to canals, circular basins, and cascades tumbling down marble steps, that last absurd magnificence of Italian and French villas. The forced elevation of cataracts was no more. The gentle stream was taught to serpentine seemingly at its pleasure; and where discontinued by different levels, its course appeared to be concealed by thickets properly
interspersed, and glittered again at a distance where it might be supposed naturally to arrive. Its borders were smoothed, but preserved their waving irregularity. A few trees scattered here and there on its edges sprinkled the tame bank that accompanied its meanders; and when it disappeared among the hills, shades descending from the heights leaned towards its progress, and framed the distant point of light under which it was lost, as it turned aside to either hand of the blue horizon (Walpole 47-8).

In 1728 appeared Robert Castell's *The Villas of the Ancients*, which lent further classical authority to the prevailing landscape garden design. Castell differentiated between three manners used by the Roman gardeners. The oldest was a simple and naive style, replaced by gardens of rules and lines. The third and most accomplished manner was a close imitation of nature, where there was no manifestation of skill, but rocks, cascades and trees in their natural forms. Having stated this, Castell did not forget to tell his contemporaries that this way of imitating nature was "the present manner of designing in China" (Streatfield 30). According to David C. Streatfield and Alistair M. Duckworth, Castell was referring to Father Matteo Ripa's book on Chinese gardens, and the two authors believe that when Father Ripa was in London, Lord Burlington, Kent's patron, purchased a copy of the book from him (Streatfield 31). If this was true, Kent's practice in the landscape gardening may have been immediately subjected to the Chinese influence.

Indeed Kent took all the efforts to make his gardens look like nature itself. To what extent he avoided all symmetrical and geometrical forms may well be told from his motto: "Nature abhors straight lines" (Clifford 135). In Kensington garden he even planted dead trees, in order to "give a greater air of truth to the scene," and soon had to be "laughed out of this excess" (Walpole 54).

Similarly inspired by the nature cult was Lancelot Brown, Kent's younger contemporary. By Brown, terraces were abolished as unnatural, and even ground was made in gently waving contours. But his chief merit lay in his water plans. He was the first to cut the bank of a lake into creeks and curves. In 1751, Horace Walpole had said of the garden at Warwick Castle, rather derogatorily, that it was by "one Brown who has set up a few ideas of Kent and Mr. Southcote." But thirty years later the writer in his journal had to praise the gardener enthusiastically: "His great and fine genius
stood unrivaled ... So closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken” (Clifford 156).

The belief that the Chinese garden followed the pattern of nature must have gained some strength from the reports of those who claimed to be witnesses to that exotic form of beauty. Père Le Comte, the Jesuit missionary who went to China in 1685, wrote about Chinese gardens in his *Nouveau mémoires sur l'etat présent de la Chine*. His comments were not very complimentary to the Chinese, or possibly, were deliberately made so in order to sound more convincing to the Europeans:

Their houses are neat and decent, but not fine. They seem still more negligent as to their gardens ... The Chinese, who so little apply themselves to order their gardens, and give them real ornaments, do yet delight in them, and are at some cost about them; they make grottos in them, raise pretty little artificial eminences, transport thither by pieces whole rocks, which they heap one upon another, without any further design than to imitate nature (Hudson 279).

Le Comte’s book, written in 1696, was immediately translated into English and, according to Reichwein, was “widely read” in England (115).

A much more enthusiastic sinophile was Père Jean Denis Attiret, a later Jesuit missionary and an artist at the court of Ch’ien Lung. In his *Description de la Maison de plaisance de l’Empereur de la Chine*, which was translated into English in the middle of the century first by Joseph Spence and later by Thomas Percy, Attiret gave an account of the gardens he had seen in Beijing, including the famous Yuan-ming Yuan. The passages were, according to the missionary, “not fine alleys or walks in right lines as in Europe, but zig-zag and winding;” the canals were “all rustic with pieces of rock, of which some stand forward, others retire, and which are disposed with so much art that one would say it was all the work of nature;” and the ascent to buildings was “not by steps polished by art, but by pieces of rock, made to appear as if they were steps formed by nature” (Percy 158,159).

Such reports, of course, gave further incentive to the vogue of chinoiserie. In the 1750s, the kinship of the English “natural” garden to the Chinese model became even more apparent when people vied with each other in building pagodas, arched bridges and Confucian temples in their gardens. With the publication of
the series of *New Designs for Chinese Temples*, which contained a multitude of designs for garden ornaments, William Halfpenny became a busy architect. Following his lead, there appeared designs of garden buildings by a group of people, including Edward Oakley, Charles Over and William Wright, with most of their works designated as "Chinese" (Honour 152).

The new craze in Chinese garden architecture came to a climax with Sir William Chambers. In his youth, Chambers had visited Canton on a mission for the Swedish East India Company and had probably sketched some interesting temples and pagodas in that city. In 1757, after some professional training in architecture, he published his *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses etc.* The passages on the Chinese garden were extracted and collected by Thomas Percy in his *Miscellaneous Pieces Relating to the Chinese.* The descriptions Chambers offered were in fact quite similar to those by Pere Attiret: For Chinese gardeners, "nature is their pattern, and their aim is to imitate her in all her beautiful irregularities;" and "They avoid all regularities in these works, observing nature according to her operations in that mountainous country" (Percy 130, 139).

In the following years Chambers shifted from the supposition that the Chinese garden was a faithful reproduction of nature to a subtler belief that the Chinese form of beauty was an appropriate balance between art and nature. Most probably, this new idea was meant to be a corrective to the prevailing extreme of banishing art altogether from gardens. In 1772, Chambers published *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardens*, in which, quite in contradiction to what he had stated in his earlier work, he argued that in their gardens the Chinese never forgot to improve nature with art. "The scenery of a garden," Chambers wrote, "should differ as much from common nature as a heroic poem from a prose relation," for "nature is incapable of pleasing without the assistance of art" (Honour 157). In order to make his points clearer, Chambers made a rather dramatic attempt. To the second edition of his *Dissertation*, which appeared the following year, he attached an "Explanatory Discourse," supposedly by a Tan Chet-qua, a native Chinese, who was of course only the author’s mouthpiece. The Chinese gentleman carefully maintained the priority of nature over art. "In the great style of gardening, neatness is not only superfluous
but destructive of the principal intent: the common roads, bridle-
ways and paths of a country, however wild, are always preferable
to the stiff, formal, made walks of a garden ... The rivers of na-
ture flow in forms that art can never equal” (Chambers 127-8).
However, he insisted that art was by no means dispensable in the
garden, for nature needed “something to disguise her vulgarity,
to rouse the attention of the spectator and to excite in his mind a
succession of strong and opposite sensations” (132). Chambers,
still behind the mask of his fictional Chinese scholar, proceeded
to admonish his fellow countrymen:

You people delight in extremes; and whenever you get upon a new scent,
pursue it with such rage, that they always overshoot the bounds. We
admire nature as much as you do; but being of a more phlegmatic dis-
position, our affections are somewhat better regulated: we consider how
she may be employed, upon every occasion, to most advantage; and do
not always introduce her in the same garb; but show her in a variety of
forms; sometimes naked, as you attempt to do, sometimes disguised;
sometimes decorated, or assisted by art ... both your artists and con-
noisseurs seem to lay too much stress on nature and simplicity. ... If
resemblance to nature were the measure of perfection, the waxen fig-
ures in Fleet Street would be superior to all the works of the divine
Buonarotti (144-5).

Chambers’ intervention turned out, as A. O. Lovejoy says, to be
“unfavorable to the Chinese vogue” (Lovejoy 134). By that time
the English landscape garden, with its meandering brooks and
walks, irregular plantations and cunning eye-catchers, had crossed
the Channel, first of all to France and then to the rest of Europe,
and came to be popularly known as “le goût anglo-chinois,” but
the Chinese vogue in England itself was now on its decline. It
lingered on for a few more decades and even had a brief but gay
Indian summer toward the end of the century with Humphrey
Repton. After that, however, the Chinese style of gardening was
never again a central topic of discussion as it had been earlier the
century.

II

It is clear from our account that the entire discussion and prac-
tice of the landscape gardening were centered around a number of
dichotomies: symmetry/asymmetry, regularity/irregularity, and
geometry/nongeometry, and all these dichotomies were governed by a larger one: art/nature. "Naturalness" became the yardstick for telling the good from the bad. The seventeenth-century formal garden was attacked and abandoned because it was considered as too artificial and therefore deviating from nature. The Chinese garden was hailed by most people as an ideal, because they believed that it gave full expression to nature and kept art in careful concealment. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, in eighteenth-century English gardening, the Chinese was almost "naturally" associated with the "natural."

That art must imitate nature is, of course, a proposition in Western culture that can be traced all the way back to Plato and Aristotle. However, in the age of neoclassicism, the meanings of the word "nature" became so multifarious that Lovejoy calls the term a "verbal Jack-of-all-trades" (Lovejoy 69). According to Lovejoy, the neoclassical "nature" could possibly have such diametrically contradictory senses as regularity and geometricization on the one side and irregularity and wildness on the other (72). This was exactly the case in the discussion of garden styles. The seventeenth-century formal garden, which the eighteenth-century landscapists disparaged as an outrageous deviation from nature, had been eulogized by Thomas Browne as the most faithful adherence to natural laws. Geometrical forms used in the garden design, according to Browne, were dictated by nature herself. Quincuncial forms and ordinations, for instance, were justified by the shapes of numerous kinds of seeds and tree leaves, which "plainly declare the naturality of this texture, and how the needle of nature delighted to work, even in low and doubtful vegetations" (Browne 310). In this way, Browne was able to declare that "studious observers may discover more analogies in the orderly book of nature, and cannot escape the elegancy of her hand in other correspondencies" (323). The regularity and orderliness of the formal garden were to him most natural, for, as he states in Cartesian language, "All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again; according to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven" (343).

Browne's theory may have sounded ironical to the gardeners of the next century, for, they might argue, he had appealed to the authority of nature in order to justify an unnatural enterprise. For
them, nature was no longer any divine order but the outdoor wildness. In their gardens, nature was looked upon as a delicate maiden, whom they scrupulously tried to protect from any possible defilement or ravishment by human culture and art. This new consecration of external nature was, of course, a reaction against the urbanization and industrialization which were sweepingly pushing everything in the country into the capitalist orbit. Nature was dear, only because of the unbridgeable distance from it. However, compared with Browne’s justification of human interference by seeking nature’s ratification, the purist attempt to keep nature unspoiled by culture and art was hardly less ironical. Nature, once “built” into a garden, was no longer raw or “untouched,” even though it was let to have all its own ways and not a single vestige of art was left in it. In a garden, what was natural was only the cultural meaning read into natural objects. The very idea that external nature was beautiful and wholesome was in itself a cultural product, and the garden, however hard one might try to make it appear artless, was in itself an artistic form. When the landscapists believed that they were embarking on the way to return to nature, they were paradoxically moving further into culture by putting forward a new cultural idea; and when they advocated that in the garden art should be suppressed in favor of nature, they were but promoting art by contributing to it a new genre.

This opposition between nature on one side and art and culture on the other, which was profoundly problematic and not easily definable even in the Western tradition itself, was now applied to the Chinese garden. As we said earlier, the Chinese garden was exemplary to most English landscapists precisely because they believed that it followed the pattern of nature and minimized art. This view was, of course, challenged by Chambers, who suggested that the Chinese gardeners, while imitating nature, did not disregard art at all. He criticized his fellow gardeners for putting too much stress on nature and taking too little notice of art. This view, however, was in fact not far from the idea with which he apparently disagreed. Like those people he criticized, Chambers also conceived of a spectrum between art and nature to which all forms of gardening without exception belong. The only difference was that, while they put the Chinese garden close to the end of nature, Chambers pushed it somehow toward the middle of the spectrum.
These English gardeners must have looked upon the mimetic formula as the principle governing all forms of art in the world, but this assumed universality was precisely an illusion of Western provincialism. In the very depths of Western thinking was a notion which saw a clear-cut confrontation between subjectivity and objectivity. Man regarded nature as something he worked upon, either to control and reform, as Western science and technology bent to do, or to imitate, which Western literature and art proclaimed to be their ultimate end. This man-nature opposition, however, did not exist in Chinese culture. The Chinese artist, instead of consciously imitating nature, spontaneously manifested the Tao, the very essence of the universe that was believed to be immanent in everything in nature. Human activities, including literature and art, were regarded not as something other than nature, but as part of the entire pattern of the universe. In Liu Hsieh’s The Literary Mind: Elaboration (Wen-Hsin-Tiao-Lung), literature (wen) is linked with the configurations (wen) of natural phenomena:

Extending [our observation] to all classes of things, [we see that] animals and plants all have their wen [patterns/embellishments]; the dragon and the phoenix present auspicious omens with their colorful decorations like elaborate paintings, the tiger and the leopard consolidate their appearances with their “brilliant” and profuse [patterns]; the sculptured colors of sun-light-reflecting clouds surpass the painters’ wondrous art; the ornate florescence of plants and trees does not need the brocade-weaver’s extraordinary skill. Now, how can these be decorations added from without? They are really just so of themselves. . . . Now, if insentient objects have such abundant colorful adornments, how can he that is a vessel with a mind be without his wen [embellishment/culture/literature] (Liu 22-3)?

Since for the Chinese artist both art and nature were manifestations of the Tao, what he needed to do was to achieve a union with the Tao intuitively. For that purpose, he had to try to forget himself in order to reach an ideal state where the barrier between subjective consciousness and objective reality no longer existed. This is illustrated by Waggie Keswick in his “Foreword” to Ji Cheng’s The Crafts of Gardens, with a story of the Taoist sage Liu Ling. When Liu sat naked in his hut meditating the Taoist truth, visitors complained of his nakedness. To this he replied: “I take the whole world as my own room and my own room as my clothing. Why then do you enter here into my trousers” (Ji 14)?

Because the subjective was merged with the objective, sense
perception and conceptual thinking became unreliable modes of knowing. As Chuang Tsu admonished, “Don’t listen with the ear, but listen with the mind; don’t listen with the mind, but listen with the spirit [ch’i]. The ear stops at listening, the mind stops at matching [things with concepts], but the spirit is empty and receives all things” (Liu 31). The highest mode of knowing was to “listen with the spirit,” which, according to James J. Y. Liu, means intuitive cognition (Liu 32). This rejection of sense-perception and conceptual thinking in favor of the intuitive cognition made an enormous impact on traditional Chinese literature and art. Scientific and analytic observation of the objective world and imitation based on a rational knowledge of the things being imitated were notions with which Chinese artists, including gardeners, would not feel at home. What Chinese gardeners wanted to achieve was not a physical resemblance to the natural objects but a resemblance in essence. As Ji Cheng says in his The Crafts of the Gardens, “If you have the real thing within you when you make the imitation, the imitation that you make will become real” (107). The “real thing” in the gardener’s mind was, of course, not any rational knowledge of the object but an intuitive identification with the Tao which underlies the natural phenomena.

Accordingly, the dominant aesthetic interest in the Chinese garden was not imitation of nature in the sense of visual resemblance, but rather the suggestion of the spirit peculiar to the manifold creation of the external world. In this respect, Chinese gardening was directly under the influence of Chinese landscape painting. Discussing the visual and plastic effects of Chinese landscape painting, Chiang Hsing-yu wrote:

Most of the landscape painters being hermits or semi-hermits, Chinese landscape painting was colored by an estrangement from the physical world. Physical likeness was not only unsought but simply dismissed as unworthy . . . As Ch’in Tsu-yong said: “In a painting, among thousands of trees not a single stroke is for a real tree; and among thousands of mountains not a single stroke for a real mountain . . . ” (77-8).

The same was probably as true with the Chinese garden. We may say something of the role played by rocks, for instance. “It is almost true to say,” states Derek Clifford reasonably, “that stones were to the Chinese and Japanese what trees were in the eighteenth-century England or flowers are at the present time” (115). In almost every Chinese garden, as noticed by Le Comte, rocks
were piled up to form miniature mountains, or Chia shan, as they were called in Chinese. The Chia shan, whether in its size or in its whimsical shape, was not meant to be a copy of any real mountain. The cognitive process from a real mountain to a Chia shan is characterized by Ch'eng Chao-hsiung with a Zenist quotation:

At the first sight mountains are mountains and waters are waters; but at the second sight mountains are no longer mountains and waters no longer waters; yet at the final look mountains are still mountains and waters still waters (90).

When a mountain was looked upon as a Tao, explains Ch'eng, it was no longer a mountain; yet, when a Tao was thought to be embodied in a Chia shan, even the unreal mountain became in a sense real (91). What was involved here was obviously not any faithful imitation of the landscape but an expression of an outlook of the universe.

It is pertinent here to discuss a translational "slippage" between the two languages, English and Chinese. For want of a better term, we are talking of the "Chinese garden," but some problems that arise from this translational expediency need to be clarified. A "garden," as used in English, refers to the totality of all things within an enclosure, be it walls or a "ha-ha." An English "natural" garden could be so inclusive as to contain various elements from wild landscape to plantations, lawns and buildings. The Chinese, on the other hand, carefully distinguished their shan shui (mountains and waters) from their yuan lin, which is generally translated as "garden." With the exceptions of some royal gardens, Chinese gardens were usually not large in size. Real mountains and large lakes rarely found their way into a garden, and the beauty of the landscape was embodied mainly in exquisitely miniaturized forms. A garden, small as it was, became for the Chinese a microcosm of the universe. On the very first page of his On the Chinese Garden, the native expert Ch'eng Chao-hsiung wrote:

From the Taoist belief that one can hold the entire universe in his sleeve and the sun and the moon in his wine pot, and from the Zenist idea that "One flower is a world and one leaf a Buddhahood," it was almost an inevitable result that in the Sung and Ming Dynasties the garden was looked upon as a world (1).

So, the Chinese garden is not to be confused with shan shui, real mountains and waters in the outdoor nature. Keeping this in
mind, we may even go further by differentiating yuan from lin, for the two words, when used separately, may carry different implications. Most English landscape gardens were closer to what was designated by lin (woods, groves). Indeed, Addison used the word “plantation” interchangeably with “garden” (VI, 68). Although yuan lin is the general term for Chinese gardens, it was yuan, not lin, that was used by the Chinese to form most of their gardens’ names. This indicates that plantation was not as predominant in Chinese as in English gardens. As Keswick says, “While the English speak of ‘planting’ a garden, the Chinese ‘build’ one” (Ji, 21). Indeed, architecture played a tremendous role in the Chinese garden. In The Crafts of Gardens, Ji Cheng discusses in great detail the layout of garden buildings, including halls [t’ang], chambers [fang], towers [lou], terraces [t’ai], belvederes [ke], pavilions [t’ing] and many others (66-72). These buildings endowed the garden with an additional function as family residence. And, since garden-owners in China were usually poets, scholars and officials, such buildings accommodated their cultural activities, where they would drink, compose poetry and talk of politics. With traces of past ages accumulated, the garden became a cultural depository. While Chambers’ garden buildings were nothing but “toys in architecture” (Honour 155), a Chinese temple might be an age-old story and a bridge could have recorded an anecdote, not to mention those inscriptions of poetic lines that would not be missing from any of the Chinese gardens. Since the configurations of human culture [wen] was perfectly compatible to the configurations [wen] of natural phenomena, and since human course was as cosmic as heaven above and earth below, the cultural elements amalgamated with the garden buildings were to the Chinese not unnatural at all. This kind of “naturalness,” however, certainly could not be measured by the criterion of the Western mimetic theory, for it belonged to a metaphysical and aesthetic system entirely different from that of the West.

III

The question why the English landscapists misread the Chinese garden has to be answered both historically and theoretically. It is certain that in an age when photography was only a science fic-
tion and the intercontinental travel a formidable hardship, the information on the Chinese garden was neither adequate nor precise. Sir William Temple, the man who first introduced the Chinese garden into England as an "irregular form of beauty," claimed that he had seen "something of this" in "some places" and "heard more of it from others who have lived among the Chinese" (1,186). That he had in the seventeenth century come across some garden in the Chinese taste was very unlikely, and by "something like this" he might be referring to some sketches of landscape on some Chinese lacquers or porcelains. During his career as a diplomat in Europe, Temple might have met some former Jesuit missionaries who gave him some account of the Chinese garden as they saw during their stay in China. Such a meager and second-hand source became the sole authority for decades. When Addison wrote about the Chinese garden, he was echoing Temple to such an extent that Lovejoy finds good reason to believe that "most of the passage is taken from Temple without acknowledgment" (Lovejoy 113).

It is generally accepted as true that Chambers had been to China in his youth, but to what extent he investigated the Chinese gardening and whether he intended to give an authentic account of it were often called in question. Some people doubt his familiarity with the Chinese garden, which he "had only glimpsed from his ship in harbor" (Streatfield 60); and some others declare, in a rather ironic tone, that even Chambers himself "was perfectly well aware that the gardens he described were not to be met with in China or anywhere else" (Clifford 149). We are not certain whether such skepticism about Chambers' authority was justifiable, but it seems safe to believe that, except for those few gross characterizations they assigned to the Chinese garden, the English did not get much opportunity to go into the details of that exotic form of beauty.

Such historical factors of the misreading, however, we do not have to overstress, for they were, after all, relative, and therefore not finally decisive. A much more fundamental cause was of course the cultural gap, a gap between the English as the Self, and the Chinese as the Other. At the very start of the craze for the Chinese garden, polarizations were quickly formed by Temple and Addison: "our" gardens were regular, "theirs" were irregular, "our"
gardens were symmetrical and geometrical, “theirs” were asymmetrical and nongeometrical. Such oppositions were set, one may feel, not in favor of the Self but in favor of the Other. Indeed, one can almost sense a curious inferiority complex in Addison’s statement that “The Chinese laughed at the plantations of our Europeans” (VI,68). But why the Chinese garden was thought to be superior? Only because “It was natural;” “It followed the pattern of nature.” The Oriental art was admired precisely because it was believed to fit into an Occidental norm, in this case the mimetic formula. Such Western admiration was by no means unfamiliar to the Chinese: China was a nation of wisdom and justice, because it was a nation with the Platonic philosopher-king; and Confucianism was great knowledge and beneficial teaching, because it sounded so much like Christianity. Yes, the admiration sounded sincere, but the admiration was given to the Other only in exchange for its conformity to the Self. The Chinese garden was presented as something so foreign and so exotic, as in the interlude in the opera The Fairy Queen, but such foreignness and exoticness were more apparent than real, for what they represented was precisely the aesthetic interest and pursuit of the English. The opposition between the Self and the Other is thus easily demolished. The Other was set at a distance only to be annexed by the Self. Therefore, behind Addison’s sense of cultural inferiority was actually a self-centeredness, a “cultural chauvinism.”

This “cultural chauvinism,” however, was an unavoidable evil. In a Chinese garden, the rockeries, the waters, the plants, the paths, the buildings and the inscriptions of poetic lines were a particular set of signs. Like words and sentences in a poem, these signs formed a text, the meaning of which, like that of any other texts, did not reside with itself but was contextually bound. When we talk, rather inaccurately, of a “correct” reading of the Chinese garden, we are only talking of its meaning as determined by its native culture, a context shared by both the gardener and the native viewer. In the English reading of the Chinese garden, however, a switch of contextuality was involved. As is well known, imitation of nature was for centuries the ultimate criterion for literature and art in the West. And it is also well known that in the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning decades of the eighteenth, England was undergoing a shift from the Cartesian and abstract
notion of nature to a conception of nature as something more intimate and physical. Such a context predetermined the English gardeners' expectations when they came to view or hear of a Chinese garden, and such expectations would inevitably lead to a reading different from that determined by the native context. The situation of the English gardener was precisely like that of Stanley Fish's colleague who misread the student's question: "Is there a text in this class?" Like Fish's colleague, the English gardener did not fail to combine the signs in the Chinese garden "into a meaningful unit," but the meaningful unit he discerned was "a function of mistaken identification" of the Chinese gardener's intention. In his own cultural context, the English gardener really had no alternative but read as the context required. He misread the Chinese garden, but, as Fish suggests in his discussion of his colleague's case, it would be more accurate to say that "he 'mispreread' the text" (Fish 311).

Although by calling the Chinese garden a text we do not mean it was a linguistic entity, yet the interpretation of such a text would inevitably be linguistic in nature. This was especially true in the age when, with no access to any visual aids, language was the sole vehicle to transmit one's ideas of the Chinese garden. Temple's source of that "irregular form of beauty" was somebody's account of it, and many other people had to refer to the authority of the reports of those witnesses: Le Comte, Attiret and Chambers. This problem of the linguistic mediation was two-fold. The limitation of language is often felt when our feelings of an artistic work defy an articulate linguistic expression. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it in *Truth and Method*, "In the face of the overwhelming presence of works of art the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking," for, within language "the socially motivated tendency towards uniformity" would force the individual reading into "particular schematic forms" (362). But what is more interesting in our case is the incompetence of a Western language in interpreting a Chinese cultural phenomenon. Language itself is an outgrowth from a particular cultural soil. What matters more is not "the conventions of linguistic expression" but "the conventions of meaning that have found their form in language" (Gadamer 362). The Chinese garden was a product of a culture whose norms and categories found
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their forms in Chinese but were not necessarily shared by a Western tongue. For a Western viewer of the Chinese garden, it would not be easy to express in words precisely what he thought of it, and this linguistic awkwardness was exactly what Attiret felt when he was fumbling with a description of Yuan-ming Yuan, a royal garden in Beijing:

I would willingly attempt such a description as might give you a just notion of these structures; but the undertaking would be too difficult, because they contain nothing that bears the least resemblance to our manner of building, or that has any relation to our architecture. Nothing but the eye can convey a true idea of them . . . (Percy 154-5).

Similarly, while praising the Chinese garden as having “more beauty than any others,” Temple had to admit that “we have hardly any notion of this sort of beauty, yet they have a particular word to express it” (I, 186). He perceived a new kind of beauty, which was beyond the Western experience, and accordingly became inexpressible in a Western language. From this linguistic awkwardness, we may well believe, Chambers could have found no escape either, when he got the opportunity to see some of the gardens in Canton. Even if he tried to be a faithful reporter of the Chinese garden, his understanding and communication would have to be shaped by his linguistic experience.

Then, since the Chinese garden conceived by the English was by no means the original one but a Chinese garden in the English version, what can be said of the Chinese influence? Later in the century, Thomas Gary strongly insisted that the landscape garden was entirely an English invention: “It is not forty years since the art was born among us; and it is sure, that there is nothing in Europe like it, and as sure that we then had no information on this head from the Chinese” (Honour 143). This “patriotism” found a much more intense version in Walpole’s On Modern Gardening, where the writer accuses the French of depriving half the English honor in favor of the Chinese:

The French have of late years adopted our style in gardens; but choosing to be fundamentally obliged to more remote rivals, they deny us half the merit, or rather the originality of the invention, by ascribing the discovery to the Chinese, and by calling our taste in gardening le goût Anglo-Chinois. I think I have shown that this is a blunder, and that the Chinese have passed to one extremity of absurdity, as the French
and all antiquity had advanced to the other, both being equally remote from nature: regular formality is the opposite point to fantastic sharawadgis (38).

Credit should be given to Walpole for having realized that the Chinese garden did not follow nature in the way as the English supposed. But, ironically, he substituted the misreading of most of his contemporaries with another misreading of his own, which was still in the mimetic pattern, only with a negative sign added to it. However, he believed this to be the truth of the Chinese garden, and the English owed nothing to the Chinese because their garden actually did not resemble its “true” Chinese counterpart. If Walpole as an English gentleman repudiated the mentorship of the Chinese, we have someone else, this time a “Chinese,” who scorned the English as an unworthy pupil. When Lien Chi Altangi, the Chinese scholar in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World*, was shown by a “lady of distinction” the “beauties” of her garden architecture, he felt repulsed with the inferior counterfeit of the Chinese taste. The man was fictional but his attitude toward cultural hybrids was not.

Pray, sir, examine the beauties of that Chinese temple which you see at the end of the garden. Is there anything in China more beautiful? Where I stand I see nothing, madam, at the end of the garden that may not as well be called an Egyptian pyramid as a Chinese temple; for that little building in view is as like the one as t’other. What! Sir, is not that a Chinese temple? you must surely be mistaken. Mr. Freeze, who designed it, calls it one, and nobody disputes his pretensions to taste (II,64).

Interestingly, while Walpole jealously refused the Chinese share in the English honor, Lien Chi Altangi sincerely worried about the contamination of the name of Chinese by English frivolities. Walpole unequivocally denied the Chinese influence on the English gardening, and Lien Chi Altangi would not be happy to acknowledge it either. Behind the reserved attitude of both sides towards this Sino-Anglo encounter in gardening was a common presupposition that cultural influence must be a faithful give-and-take, with nothing added or lost in the process. For Walpole, if the Chinese garden did not really look like the English “natural” garden, the English were free of any indebtedness to the Chinese; and for Lien Chi Altangi, if the English garden was not in the genuinely Chinese taste, to say it was under the Chinese influence would be doing a violent injustice to his native art.
But they were both much mistaken. Indeed, the English landscape garden was actually not genuinely Chinese, but this fact did not give much support either to the English repudiation of the Chinese influence or to the Chinese dissociation of the kindred with an “unwanted” pupil. The English misreading of the Chinese garden was not only inevitable in a new cultural context, as we discussed above, but also a necessary prologue to this cross-culture comedy, for only the misread version of the Chinese garden could be acceptable in England. The context did not choose a misreading at random, but channelled the reading into a most congenial form. The mimetic formula may have been imposed on the Chinese garden too forcibly, but it was exactly this misapplied formula that made the Chinese garden so popular in a different culture. What that “irregular form of beauty” was really like did not seem very important with the English, for they indeed had little to do with those untransferable elements unique to the Chinese culture. What they needed to do was to read their own values and norms into the Chinese garden and make it Anglicized. This misreading of the original, which both Walpole and Lien Chi Atlangi saw as the ground for denying the Sino-Anglo kinship in gardening, was exactly what made such a kinship possible.

This is not to say that cross-culture misreadings are always desirable and will unexceptionally lead to productive ends. In some cases, a misreading that arises from cultural provincialism would hinder even a most superficial understanding of the other culture. When chinaware first reached Europe, “the facial peculiarities of the Mongolian race, as they appeared on the wares imported from the Far East, were considered distortions of the incapable Chinese artists” (Erdberg 11). Such ridiculous blunders could never in any way become productive. However, when a misreading of a phenomenon in another culture occurs opportunely at a moment of a big change of taste, and when such a misreading is channelled and directed by the new aesthetic or academic needs, it may turn out to be the initial stage of a creative process.

The English misreading of the Chinese garden was such a happy case. The eighteenth century was a period in which “people were certain that suggestions and instructive hints would produce good results everywhere” (Erdberg 44). The misreading of the
Chinese garden provided the English with such suggestions and instructive hints, and the result, although by no means faithful to the Chinese original, was after all a good one.

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