

New Century Garden: Talking About Public Art in Chinatown
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Guest speaker Professor Xing Ruan
Garden as Public Sphere – A Historical Lesson?

This is an edited transcript of Professor Xing Ruan's talk that was accompanied by a slideshow presentation given at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art on 21 October 2011 for the forum New Century Garden: Talking About Public Art in Chinatown, produced by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in partnership with City of Sydney. Copyright of this text remains with the author. For video documentation of this talk visit www.4a.com.au

The purpose of this forum *New Century Garden* is, I believe, to predict what the 'new century garden' will be in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately I am a historian, so the only thing I'm able to know – if I'm lucky – is the past. So I wish to use this opportunity to ask whether or not there is a historical lesson here. I wish to ask whether or not this idea of a pre-modern Chinese garden has any potential to be reincarnated for the new century?

Chinese Garden as a Place – the spatial anatomy

I will begin with the Chinese garden as a physical place. As you know, we have a Chinese Garden here in Sydney's Chinatown, and the spatial anatomy of Chinese gardens is all too familiar to most of us. Now if one takes a look at the plan of the Bi residence in Suzhou¹, located in the south-east of Jiangsu Province in Eastern China, one notices that this is not something that we see too often because in this instance the garden and the house are actually together, which it should be, because in pre-modern China gardens were often regarded as a compliment to the house. If I may borrow a rather elegant term coined by my colleague and cultural geographer Professor Ronald G. Knapp, a Chinese house is a 'social template' because when one looks at the axis and the symmetry in the series of the courtyards depicted in this plan of the Bi residence, what it reveals and what is rather legible even in this plan, is that, to the people who belong to that culture, this plan facilitates a social hierarchy within the family and its habitants, and a kind of decorum that the house itself imposes on you. In a way a house itself is rather didactic: you ought to behave in certain ways and you know it. But beyond this rather rigid structure, if one looks at a Chinese garden as a physical space – let's say its whole anatomy – the pattern of the Chinese garden is actually quite universal; it is quite simple. Now if you understand that plan, and if you have been to the Chinese garden here in Chinatown, you will find it is quite repetitive. All Chinese gardens have exactly the same spatial anatomy, exactly the same pattern, repeated over the centuries. So what actually gives a Chinese garden a distinctive character, if there is any? The distinctive character does not come from a physical place or physical structure.

Chinese Garden as a Synthesis – epicure, literature, art and architecture

I would like to illustrate this idea with two fascinating episodes from the famous eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Hóng Lóu Mèng* (紅樓夢), or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, authored by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹), which is all too familiar in the canon of Chinese classics. The first episode I would like to describe in this extraordinary novel, which I regard as the absolute pinnacle in pre-modern Chinese literature, occurs when the master of one house, Jia Zhen, invites a group of kindred spirits and literati friends, and also his son, for a walk in his newly completed garden. What takes place is an interesting competitive game where all these people are asked to recite classical poems, and to give them some slight twists for they are asked to name the buildings and bridges in the garden, thereby bestowing a meaning and creating a spatial narrative hitherto unexpressed. After this is completed the garden could be thought to have a life, and from this point onwards the garden belongs to the master's family, and in particular, the master himself – the person who has commissioned the garden. The builder had nothing to do with that; the builder just repeated the existing spatial pattern.

Another interesting episode from the same novel is about a particularly pleasurable thing to do in autumn when one of the capable granddaughter-in-law, Feng Jie, organises a party for the grandmother, Lady Jia, to have an outing in the garden and eat steamed crab. The old lady walks across this rickety bamboo bridge to reach the pavilion; this prompts her to think about her childhood and the memory of her own garden. Later, Lady Jia and others eat crab, taking pleasure in the special art of how to actually open the crab and eat it elegantly, following the manners for this sort of activity which dictate how one should eat crab accompanied by tea and wine, and how much one should eat and so on. It is essential to understand that eating crab is the supreme culinary art in China. Indeed, the seventeenth-century Chinese playwright and erotic novelist Li Yü has written a wonderful book on food, women and other pleasures in domestic life, in which he says that the supreme food in Chinese culture is actually steamed crab in autumnⁱⁱ. In addition to everything about good and its season, it also has a wonderful texture which is very rare. So eating crab is an art. After enjoying the steamed crab, the grandmother is accompanied by a servant girl back to the house to take a little nap whilst the young ones and their servants go fishing and admiring chrysanthemums. But the more literary ones – the prince, Bao Yu, and the princesses get together to walk to the garden hall where the rice paper is already laid out, the ink is ground, and paint brushes are prepared, to start composing poems on chrysanthemums. And these poems range from the memory of last year's chrysanthemums to the admiration for the qualities of chrysanthemums – their colour, fragrance, you name it – there is no limit. That is one particular chapter in that book which I find pertinent to our discussion.

Chinese Garden as Public Sphere

At this point, it is quite important for me to remind you of this rather peculiar Chinese attitude or disinterest in anything that is material. In a sense the Chinese can be seen as being completely uninterested in materiality. There is a wonderful observation made by one of Australia's most important sinologists and great intellectual Professor Pierre Ryckmans (who is also known under the pen-name Simon Leys): he notices that when foreigners visit China often they are a little

disheartened. They often ask how come a country with such a long, unbroken history has so little material heritage? And when beautiful old buildings were demolished to give way to the Olympics, foreigners were very sentimental but the Chinese just couldn't be bothered. They wouldn't care. Well, that is the surface of things, at least. I think that Professor Ryckmans, as well as Professor F.W. Mote, have in particular noticed this very important aspect of Chinese culture. That is, the value of the written word is always greater than anything that is material. Let me quote what Simon Leys has to say:

Thus, the past which continues to animate Chinese life in so many striking, unexpected or subtle ways seems to inhabit the people rather than the bricks and stones. The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible. ...[E]ternity should not inhabit the building, it should inhabit the builder.ⁱⁱⁱ

I think this is a very compelling observation of Chinese culture.

So if we return to the Chinese garden maybe there's not much there to learn in terms of its physical characteristics or spatial anatomy. Speaking as an architect, I feel very sad about that. But looking at Chinese culture one recognises that 'the greatest form has no shape, or the greatest image has no form' - I don't know how to adequately translate that into English with the equivalent poetics but basically what it says is that what is invisible probably is more eternal. If the garden works, if that place is animated by people's way of occupying it, in the end it is a synthesis of architecture, culture, literature and almost anything else one can think of. So the idea of a 'public sphere' is rather fitting for seeing the Chinese garden as private, as a walled compound, is probably a misreading because after all it is a social place.

New Century Garden – a failed Chinese attempt and its paradox

My final observation is an example that shows a rather heroic but failed attempt to make a 'new century garden' as a civic place in China and, it's, perhaps, lasting paradoxes. In the early 1950s, at the beginning of the new Republic of China, Professor Liang Sicheng (梁思成), the son of the famous Qing Dynasty reformist Liang Qichao (梁启超), having been trained as an architect in the U.S.A. at the University of Pennsylvania, returned to China with a great deal of enthusiasm. When the communists went into Beijing, he was approached by Premier Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao to give them a list of Beijing's heritage buildings. He was very impressed as he presumed that this new regime actually wanted to preserve some cultural heritage, that they weren't just a bunch of cultural thugs and vandals. So unlike many of his colleagues Professor Liang Sicheng decided to stay in China. In the early days of the new Republic, he thought he could propose something wonderful: a new century civic place for Beijing^{iv}. He suggested that the new city centre should be built on the western side of the old city and that the old city should be preserved. And then he pointed out this wonderful city wall, about 40 kilometres long, and he said let's use it. Let's green it and use it as a civic park as that will serve a very fine Chinese habit, that is, occasionally you would climb high and inspect the horizon. A very beautiful, romantic idea. But his dream was devastated. Legend has it that one day Chairman Mao stood on Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, and while inspecting the horizon, Mao envisioned a forest of gigantic industrial chimneys with black smoke bellowing into the sky. Mao saw this as the future of Beijing. The beautiful city wall in Beijing was demolished. The rest is history.

To conclude, it is perhaps quite easy for us to blame the brutal regime for Professor Liang Sicheng's sad fate and his failed attempt to make a civic place, a kind of 'new century garden'. But maybe there is something else. This garden would remain as a 'new century garden' if it were an envisioned place for vision, and for vision alone. There are no other ingredients to allow the Chinese to have that kind of synthesis as seen in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. If that is also one of the reasons that this heroic attempt failed, maybe there is a paradox here, because this kind of vision – to inspect the horizon and to have no fear of the freedom of the space – is indeed the essence of our modernity.

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Notes

ⁱ Ground floor of residence and garden, Bi residence, Suzhou. Source: see Chen Congzhou, *Traditional Suzhou Dwellings*, Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, Shanghai, 2003: 187.

ⁱⁱ Li Yü (Liweng), *Xianqing Oujii*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simon Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness*, Black Inc. Collingwood, Victoria, 2011:239-58.

^{iv} For the city-all-park/garden proposed by Liang Sicheng, 1951, see Wang Jun, *Cheggi*, Shenghuo Dushu Xingzhi, Beijing, 2003: 110.

Professor Xing RUAN has been Professor of Architecture at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) since 2004. He was Chair of Architecture Discipline and Director of Master of Architecture Program from 2005 to 2009. Prior to his appointment at UNSW, he was the Head of Department of Architecture at the University of Technology Sydney. Xing is a scholar of international standing. His recent books include: *Allegorical Architecture* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), and *New China Architecture* (Periplus/Tuttle, 2006); *Topophilia and Topophobia: Reflections on Twentieth-century Human Habitat* (co-editor, Routledge, 2007), and *Skyplane* (co-editor, UNSW Press, 2009). Xing has published on architecture and anthropology, architectural education, Louis Kahn, China's modern and contemporary architecture, as well as Australian contemporary architecture. His books have received critical acclaims and enthusiastic appraisals from both academic journals and the mainstream media. His essays have appeared in some of the world's leading academic journals, such as the *Journal of Society of Architectural Historians*. He also writes as an architectural critic for architectural magazines. In 2011, he won the third prize in the first UIA (the International Union of Architects) International Competition for Research Papers in Architecture and Urban design. Born in China, Xing received his architectural education from the Southeast University in Nanjing. He has lectured in the USA, the UK, Italy, South-East Asia, China, New Zealand and Australia. Xing practiced architecture in China from 1986 until 1991; he has maintained an ongoing involvement in architectural practice in Australia.