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Stages of nature. Western travels through Chinese gardens in the seventeenth and eighteenth century

In 1847 Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) published the long awaited second volume of his influential *Kosmos*, his effort to a comprehensive description of nature. While the first volume of his monumental work aimed at offering an objective depiction of the physical nature, the second volume was conceived as a transcultural "poetic delineation of nature." Its purpose was to explore the evolution of human perception of nature and the varied strategies different civilizations adopted to both grasp nature and give shape to the emotional response that the contemplation of the natural landscape elicited.[1]

In his investigation through time and history to understand "the impressions [of nature] reflected by the external senses on the feelings, and on the poetic imagination of mankind,"[2] von Humboldt discussed the Chinese approach to nature and proposed the Chinese garden as the direct result of a profound sense of appreciation for the natural landscape. In China, he noted, "The feeling for nature … was most strongly and variously exhibited in their cultivation of parks."[3] To support his understanding of the gardens of China as evocations of the natural landscape, von Humboldt, who had never travelled to China, referred to literary sources he considered reliable. He alluded to the description of the Qing imperial park of Bishu Shanzhuang (Mountain Estate for Escaping the Summer Heat), in Chengde, written by the British diplomat George Leonard Staunton (1737–1801) and published in 1797 in his account of the Macartney embassy to China Europeans were well familiar with.[4] He also referred to Chinese literary sources, including in his text a quotation from a Chinese scholar named "Lieu-tscheu" [Liu Zongyan?] who discussed the design principles behind Chinese gardens:

> "The art of laying out gardens consists in an endeavour to combine cheerfulness of aspect, luxuriance of growth, shade, solitude, and repose, in such a manner that the senses may be deluded by an imitation of rural nature. Diversity, which is the main advantage of free landscape, must, therefore, be sought in a judicious choice of soil, an alternation of chains of hills and valleys, gorges, brooks, and lakes cov-

1 Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, pp. 221–223.

2 Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, transl. C. Otté, vol 2, Bohn, London, 1849, p. 370.

3 Von Humboldt, 1849 (see note 2), p. 462.

4 George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, 2 vols., G. Nicol, London, 1797. Lord George Macartney led the British embassy to the Qianlong emperor in 1792–1794.

> ered with aquatic plants. Symmetry is wearying, and ennui and disgust will soon be excited in a garden where every part betrays constraint and art."[5]

This excerpt was, in fact, part of a comprehensive study of Chinese garden design, the "Essai sur les jardins de plaisance des Chinois," written in 1774 by the French Jesuit Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727–1780).[6] Probably aware of the criticism of Jesuits writings on China that had arisen at the end of the eighteenth century, von Humboldt wished to reassure his readers about the reliability of his references, showing that he drew exclusively on Chinese literary sources and on accounts by British travellers, who, beginning in the last decade of the eighteenth century played an increasingly important role in acquainting Europe with China and its gardens. However, going against the current of the nineteenth-century debate on garden design, von Humboldt acknowledged an affinity between the Chinese and English garden traditions. The harmonious and varied representation of nature he perceived in Chinese gardens prompted the Prussian naturalist to write that "The Chinese gardens appear to have approached most nearly to what we are now accustomed to regard as English parks."[7] He connected the English landscape garden and the Chinese garden as they were both designed to convey an idea of the larger landscapes and to stimulate a sense of communion with nature that derived by an appreciation of the natural landscape both garden traditions were based on.

At the time of the publications of von Humboldt's *Kosmos*, the idea of the Chinese garden as an autonomous typology characterized by naturalness, irregularity, variety, and proximity to the rural landscape was well established in Western consciousness. (fig. 1) The familiarity that Westerners had with Chinese garden design by the end of the eighteenth century took its inspiration from the accounts

5 Von Humboldt, 1849 (see note 2), p. 463. Von Humboldt mentioned two other Chinese literary sources translated by two French Jesuits, missionaries at the Qing court. He commented on a poem composed by the Qianlong emperor to celebrate Mukden (modern Shenyang), the ancient capital city of the Qing empire. Written in Chinese and rendered in Manchu, the poem was translated in French by the Jesuit Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (1718–1793), and published with the title *Éloge de la Ville de Moukden et de ses environs*, N. M. Tilliard, Paris, 1770. Von Humboldt also mentions the poem in which Sima Guang (1019–1086), a Song dynasty Confucian scholar and statesman, celebrated his garden Dule yuan (Garden of Solitary Delight), in the city of Luoyang. Its French translation by Pierre-Martial Cibot was published in 1777: De Sée-Ma-Kouang: Le jardin de Sée-Ma-Kouang, in: *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois: Par les Missionnaires de Pekin*, vol. 2, Nyon, Paris, 1777, pp. 645–650, to which Cibot added a brief introduction: Le jardin de Sée-Ma-Kouang: Pöeme, in: *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois: Par les Missionnaires de Pekin*, vol. 2, Nyon, Paris, 1777, pp. 643–644.

6 Pierre-Martial Cibot, "Essai sur les jardins de plaisance des Chinois," in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les moeurs, les usages, & c. des Chinois: Par les Missionnaires de Pekin*, vol. 8, Nyon, Paris, 1782, pp. 301–326. In Cibot's "Essai," the author of the quote is called "Lieou-tcheou." Cibot probably referred to Liu Zongyuan (773–819), Tang poet and scholar, known particularly for his essays on landscape. To his contemporaries he was known as Liu Liuzhou, as he was exiled to this town in southern China.

7 Von Humboldt, 1849 (see note 2), p. 462.

Fig. 1 Wen Zhengming, Living Aloft: Master Liu's Retreat. Hanging scroll, 1543. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Marie-Hélène and Guy Weill, in honor of Wen C. Fong, 2015.

of Western travellers visiting China. Jesuits and other missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and casual tourists provided Europe with their understanding of Chinese gardens through journals, letters, travel accounts, missionaries' reports, and general descriptions of China and its culture.[8]

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the Chinese garden had consistently fascinated Europeans and discussions of its design strategy consisting in the imitation of the forms of a natural landscape through artifice had nurtured the scholarly debate accompanying the evolution of Western garden aesthetics from compositions inspired by geometry to those inspired by nature.[9] By the end of the

8 On Western travellers' accounts of the gardens of China see, Osvald Sirén, *China and the Gardens of Europe of the Eighteenth Century*, Roland Press, New York, 1950, pp. 3–9; Craig Clunas, Nature and Ideology in Western Descriptions of Chinese Gardens, in: Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (ed.), *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C., 1997, pp. 21–33; and Peter Valder, *Gardens in China*, Timber Press, Portland, Ore., 2002, pp. 17–63. For a study of the Jesuits' accounts of Chinese gardens, see Bianca Maria Rinaldi, Borrowing from China: the Society of Jesus and the Ideal of Naturalness in XVII and XVIII century European Gardens, in: *Die Gartenkunst* 17 (2005) 2, pp. 319–337.

9 On the influence of Chinese gardens on eighteenth-century European garden aesthetics see, Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism, in: *Essays in the History of Ideas*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1948, pp. 99–135; Sirén 1950 (see note 8); Dora Wiebenson, *The Picturesque Garden in France*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1978, especially chapters 3 and 4; Jurgis Baltrušaitis, Land of Illusion: China and the Eighteenth Century Garden, in: *Landscape* 11, (1961–1962) 2, pp. 5–11; Jurgis Baltrušaitis, Gardens and Lands of Illusion, in: *Aberrations: An Essay on the Legend of Forms*, MIT Press Cambridge, Mass., 1989, pp. 138–181; Antoine Gournay, Jardins chinois en France à la fin du XVIIIe

eighteenth century, Europe's prolonged fascination with China and its gardens, however, had already begun to decline. British intellectuals were not considering anymore the gardens of China as a possible model of references. They were keen to demonstrate the difference between the Chinese and English approaches to garden design progressively diminishing the presumed adherence of the gardens of China to the natural landscape.

This essay explores the evolution of Western perception of the Chinese approach to nature expressed in garden design as emerged from the accounts of Western travellers during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when Europeans' fascination with the Chinese gardens and their admiration for China reached its peak.[10] The chronological framework bears witness to the evolution of Western travellers' perceptions of Chinese gardens, that shifted from the general fascination for the gardens' irregularity and a diffused naturalness of the seventeenth century, to an increasingly methodical approach of the eighteenth century, when Western eyewitnesses tried to codify the gardens' distinctive design strategy.

Three main themes emerge from accounts of the gardens of China by Western travellers over time, reflecting the characteristics these observers gave preference to in their investigations of the compositional design mechanism of Chinese gardens. The Chinese garden was first presented as an evocation of the natural landscape through the construction of an artificial topography; then as the image of the countryside; and finally it was described as a planned landscape itinerary through a variety of scenes.

Artificial topography

The crafted natural appearance of Chinese gardens exerted a prolonged fascination on Western observes. In their writings compiled in the seventeenth century and in the early eighteenth century, Western travellers emphasized the ability of the Chinese in shaping the ground of their gardens by constructing an artificial topography that reproduced elements of the natural landscape. Among the range of natural forms reconstructed in the gardens of China, travellers focused on a specific feature they considered the most relevant characteristic of those gardens' natural quality: artificial mountains. (fig. 2) Travellers appreciated the skills necessary to build them, along with the inventiveness and ingenuity that the creation of these topographic forms entailed.

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siècle, in: *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 78 (1991), pp. 259–273; Janine Barrier, Monique Mosser, and Che Bing Chiu, *Aux jardins de Cathay: L'imaginaire anglo-chinois en Occident*, Les Editions de l'Imprimeur, Besançon, 2004, pp. 74–84; Yu Liu, *Seeds of a Different Eden: Chinese Gardening Ideas and a New English Aesthetic Ideal* (University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 2008, especially pp. 1–41.

10 The topics explored in this essay are more extensively discussed in my book *Ideas of Chinese Gardens: Western Accounts, 1300–1860*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2015.

Fig. 2 Wen Zhengming, The Cassia Grove Studio. Handscroll, ca. 1532. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1989.

In his *Novus atlas sinensis*, published in 1655, the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini (1614–1661) wrote that in the garden of the emperor there were "many mountains, raised by skilled hand, which can arouse envy among the real ones for the quality of the craft [with which they are built]."[11] Likewise when the Dutch envoy Johannes Nieuhof (1618–1672), in 1665, came to describe the same gardens, he admired the "Rocks or Artificial Hills, which are so curiously wrought, that Art seems to exceed Nature."[12]

The Portuguese Jesuit Álvaro Semedo (1585/1586–1658) put emphasis on the effort to construct the artificial mountains in the gardens, that involved the search and transport of mineral specimens for different areas. In his *Imperio de la China*, written in 1642, he explained that the Chinese, in their gardens, "raise artificiall mountaines; to which end they bring from farre, great pieces of rocks."[13] As Portuguese Jesuit Gabriel de Magalhães (1610–1677) explained discussing the use of rocks to form manufactured hills in the garden, "the *Chineses* taking great delight to behold those unpolish'd works of nature."[14] Magalhães's comment reveals the aesthetic value of jagged rocks that were used in the garden not only as evocations of natural sceneries but also as allusions to the passage of time.[15]

11 Martino Martini, *Novus atlas sinensis*, Blaeu, Amsterdam, 1655, p. 31.

12 Johannes Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces, to the Great Tartar Cham, Emperor of China*, trans. John Ogilby, Macock, London, 1669, p. 129.

13 Álvaro Semedo, *The History of That Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*, E. Tyler, London, 1655, p. 3.

14 Gabriel de Magalhães, *A New History of China* …, Newborough, London, 1688, p. 324.

15 On the role of rocks in the Chinese aesthetic and on Western perceptions of those rocks, see David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 95–114.

It was the aesthetic quality of the single rocks, pierced by the winds or shaped by the erosion of the water, together with their positioning, that intensified the contrivance. Magalhães provided an intriguing description of the compositions of rocks and rough stones arranged to resemble natural mountain ranges and peaks. In his general account of China published in 1688, Magalhães described a garden within the Imperial City in Beijing as dominated by a

> "Mountain made with hands like a Sugarloaf environ'd with Rocks […] These Rocks are for the most part full of holes and hollownesses, occasion'd by the continual dashing of the waves […] And they are so dispos'd as to counterfeit the high out-juttings, and steep and rugged Precipices of Rocks; so that at a moderate distance the whole seems to represent some craggy wild Mountain, the first work of Nature."[16]

In the gardens of China, travellers were confronted with mountains that provided an explicit image of nature. They were displayed as geological formations that suggested an immediate reference to the natural landscape by reproducing a varied topography within the context of the garden. Just as in nature, artificial mountains in Chinese gardens organized their surrounding space and provided the scenic backdrops against which all the garden's compositional elements, associated with the natural landscape, were harmoniously set: streams, ponds, plains, and woods.

The presence of the artificial mountains prompted Western travellers to synthetize the design principle inspiring Chinese garden design in a compelling slogan: "imitating nature." At the turn of the seventeenth century, the discovery that the design strategy behind Chinese gardens consisted in the imitation of the forms of a natural landscape through artifice led to a division of opinions about the Chinese attitude toward garden design among the direct eyewitnesses. The French Jesuit Louis Le Comte (1655–1728), who reached China in 1688, criticized Chinese gardens for their natural simplicity. According to him, the Chinese attempt at imitating the natural landscape resulted in too modest gardens, that lacked a clear compositional structure and, therefore, aesthetic quality. The compositions of rugged rocks were emblematic of this approach. In his *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état present de la Chine*, published in 1696, Le Comte wrote:

> "The Chineses, who so little apply themselves to order their Gardens, and manage the real Ornaments, are nevertheless taken with them, and are at some cost about them; they make Grotto's in them, raise little pretty Artificial Eminences, transport

16 Magalhães 1688 (see note 14), pp. 324–325.

> thither by piecemeal whole Rocks, which they heap one upon another, without any further design, than to imitate Nature."[17]

With a completely different attitude, the Scottish physician John Bell (1691–1763), who accompanied the Russian diplomatic mission sent to the Kangxi emperor by Peter the Great in 1719–1722, praised the sophisticated imitation of an articulated natural landscape he perceived in the gardens he visited. This design strategy was emphasized by the artificial construction of the various elements evoking the forms of nature – not only the hills, but also groves and bodies of water – and their arrangement within the garden's enclosure. Describing the green areas within the Imperial City in Beijing, in his *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia to Diverse Parts of Asia*, published in 1763, Bell noted an artificial

> "large canal, of an irregular figure […] and the earth dug out of it has raised an high bank, from whence you have a full view of the city, and the country adjacent, to a considerable distance. This mount rises to a ridge, which is planted with trees; resembling the wild and irregular scenes of nature that frequently present themselves in this country."[18]

While the crafted mountains remained the most prominent elements of the garden's composition to be perceived, the careful planting of trees on their slopes contributed to their natural appearance and accentuated the verisimilitude of the mountain scene.

However generic and limited in detail, earlier accounts by Western travellers reported a garden that was the result of both a sensitivity to the natural landscape, expressed in the representation of an intricate topography through a synthetic approach, and the skills necessary to construct it.

An ordered and irregular rural landscape

The presence of the manufactured hills and the rocky compositions that Western observers emphasized to convey the character of the gardens of China suggested a sense of natural appearance and general irregularity in the garden's spatial arrangement that prompted further investigations.

In the eighteenth century, the largest number of commentaries about Chinese gardens came from Jesuit missionaries. Thanks to their position at the imperial court, where they worked as artists and scientists for the emperors, they had a priv-

17 Louis Le Comte, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*, Anisson, Paris, 1696, vol. 1, p. 336. Robert Kinnaird Batchelor Jr., *The European Aristocratic Imaginary and the Eastern Paradise: Europe, Islam, and China, 1100–1780*, PhD diss., University of California, 1999, pp. 758–764.

18 John Bell, *Travels from St. Petersburg in Russia to Diverse Parts of Asia*, vol. 2, Robert and Andrew Foulis, Glasgow, 1763, p. 52.

Fig. 3 Wen Zhengming, Garden of the Inept Administrator. Album, leaf c, 1551. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1979.

ileged perspective on Chinese gardens. From the beginning of the century, Jesuit missionaries initiated a new approach in their observations, intended to codify the design principles of that garden inspired by the natural landscape. Jesuits turned to an image that was much different than rough nature, expressed by the artificial mountain, to convey their perception of the gardens of China: the countryside (figs. 3–4). The image of the countryside the Jesuits proposed represented the gardens' apparent natural simplicity and, at the same time, it expressed a complex composition that consisted of a great variety of natural and architectural elements harmoniously juxtaposed within the articulated topography of the gardens.

The relation between Chinese gardens and rural landscape appeared in the Jesuits' accounts as early as 1705, in a letter written by French Jesuit Jean-François Gerbillon (1654–1707) and published in 1713. In it, Gerbillon provided a short description of the pleasure garden of the Kangxi emperor comparing it to a frag-

Fig. 4 Wen Zhengming, Garden of the Inept Administrator. Album, leaf d, 1551. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1979.

ment of fertile countryside. That serene landscape included ponds, grasslands, clumps of trees, orchards, and lawns.[19] It was the French Jesuit Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768) who gave authority to the equation of Chinese garden with the countryside, in a letter written in 1743 and published in 1749.[20] In this letter Attiret, who arrived in China in 1738 and spent the remainder of his life serving at the Qing court as a painter, gave a passionate description of Yuanming yuan (Garden

19 Lettre du Père Gerbillon. A Peking en l'année 1705, in: *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères, par quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 10, Barbou, Paris, 1713, pp. 412–428.

20 Jean-Denis Attiret, Lettre du frère Attiret de la Compagnie de Jésus, peintre au service de l'empereur de Chine, à M. d'Assaut. A Pékin le Ier novembre 1743, in: *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères, par quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 27, Guerin, Paris, 1749, pp. 1–57. For a recent discussion of Attiret's description of Yuanming yuan see Greg M. Thomas, Yuanming Yuan/Versailles: Intercultural Interactions Between Chinese and European Palace Cultures, in: *Art History* 32 (2009), pp. 115–143.

of Perfect Brightness) under the reign of the Qianlong emperor. The celebrated imperial park that Attiret described was characterized by a "beautiful Disorder", the term Attiret chose to express the park's irregular design – obtained through an elaborate composition of hills, valleys, lakes, sinuous streams, and architectural elements, scattered with masses of trees and traversed by winding paths. On the basis of his observations at Yuanming yuan, Attiret concluded that Chinese gardens "go entirely on this Principle, 'That what they are to represent there, is a natural and wild View of the Country; a rural Retirement.'"[21]

The image of a natural and rustic countryside was the Jesuits' visual formula to give a definitive interpretation of the main characteristics of Chinese garden design that other Western travellers had struggled to define. The Swedish naturalist Olof Torén (1718–1753), who visited China in 1750–1752, could not find any other expression to define Chinese garden design than an "agreeable natural confusion."[22] The missionary Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) compared the lively yet serene variety of Chinese gardens to a popular image familiar to him, the Neapolitan crèche. With its profuse array of scenes and figures set in a backdrop that mixed natural and architectural elements, the Neapolitan Nativity scene became for Ripa the emblematic representation of Chinese gardens. Ripa, who served at the imperial court in Beijing as a painter and engraver from 1711 to 1723, gained his understanding of Chinese garden design from the imperial parks he experienced: Kangxi's imperial summer residence of Bishu shanzhuang (Mountain Estate to Escape the Summer Heat), located in modern Chengde, and Changchun yuan (Garden of Joyful Spring), near Beijing. Praising the planned irregularity and the diversity of spaces and elements the imperial parks offered, Ripa described the parks as natural landscapes of mountains and wooded hills, valleys, plains, forests, brooks and lakes and rivers traversed by happy boating parties and marked by islets scattered with pavilions.[23]

The concept of the countryside elaborated by the Jesuits aimed at synthetizing the attempts to interpret the main characteristics of the Chinese garden – its irregularity, variety, and a diffused naturalness – and became a persistent key to present Chinese garden design principles by Western travelers.

Over time, Western accounts included an increasing wealth of details about the variety and surprising sequences of scenes of Chinese gardens.

21 Jean-Denis Attiret, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Garden near Pekin*, trans. Sir Harry Beaumont [Joseph Spence], Dodsley, London, 1752, pp. 38–39.

22 Olof Torén, Letter V, in: Peter Osbeck, *A Voyage to China and the East Indies*, vol. 2, B. White, London, 1771, p. 230.

23 Ripa's descriptions of Kangxi's imperial parks are included in the meticolous journal he kept during his stay in China and that was only published posthumously in 1832, in three volumes, with the title *Storia della fondazione della Congregazione e del Collegio de' Cinesi*.

An orchestrated landscape itinerary

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Western accounts shifted gradually from the image of a serene rural landscape, focusing more on the visual seduction offered by the garden's variety.

In a letter written from Beijing in 1767, the French Jesuit Michel Benoist (1715–1774), who arrived in China in 1745 and worked for the Qianlong emperor for almost thirty years, expressed the visual lure of the Chinese garden, describing it as a place where the visitor was fascinated and intrigued by continuous discoveries: "You see a sort of ensemble whose beauty strikes and enchants you, and after a few hundred steps, some new objects present themselves to you, eliciting new admiration."[24]

Western observers emphasized the visual and emotional experience in a garden organized as a variety of elements and episodes, to be discovered along a set itinerary that guided the visitor through the grounds, gradually revealing its composition. This design method offered the visitor a complex experience of the garden, that travelers explained by turning to the concept of the "scene." By using the term "scene," travelers explicitly expressed the artificiality of the Chinese garden's composition as a sequence of carefully composed views, each characterized by a specific formal and aesthetic identity, to be seen from specific places and pavilions. In his letter written in 1743, Attiret described the different "vues" (views) the imperial park of Yuanming yuan offered. He showed that the Chinese design method in gardens consisted of configuring a sequence of separate sites, each of which focused on architectural elements set in a backdrop of natural elements. (Figures 5–6) A few years later, British architect William Chambers (1723–1796) presented the Chinese garden as a visual construct generated by a sequence of carefully planned scenes. In his *Design of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils*, published in 1757, Chambers discussed three different types of scenes in Chinese gardens – the beautiful, the enchanted, and the horrid – that he defined according to their capacity of arousing different emotions in the visitor.[25] Chambers emphasized the aesthetic of variety produced by the diverse scenes and based on contrasts and on the dialectic of an alternation of opposite spatial qualities used to arouse curiosity in the visitor.[26] The captain of the Swedish East India

24 Michel Benoist, Lettre du Père Benoist à Monsieur Papillon d'Auteroche. A Péking, le 16 novembre 1767, in: *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères, Mémoires de la Chine*, vol. 23, Merigot, Paris, 1781, pp. 536–537.

25 William Chambers, *Design of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils . . . to which is Annexed a Description of their Temples, Houses, Gardens*, Published for the author, London, 1757.

26 The literature on Chambers and his writings on Chinese gardens is profuse. Important sources include Robert C. Bald, Sir William Chambers and the Chinese Garden, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (1950), 3, p. 287–320; Eileen Harris, Design of Chinese Buildings and the Dissertation on Oriental Gardening, in: John Harris (ed.), *Sir William Chambers, Knight of the Polar Star*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1970, pp. 144–162; David Porter, Beyond the Bounds of Truth: Cultural Translation and

Fig. 5 After Yuan Jiang, View of a Garden Villa. Handscroll, 18th century (?). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. From the P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Family Collection, Gift of Constance Tang Fong, in honor of her mother, Mrs. P. Y. Tang, 1982.

Company Carl Gustav Ekeberg (1716–1784) offered a catalogue of the different scenes to be found in a Chinese garden. Ekeberg, who made several journeys to southeastern China in 1742–1778, in his booklet entitled *Kort berättelse om den chinesiska landt-hushåldningen*, published in 1757, detailed

> "hills covered with bushes, below which run some rivulets, surrounded with close standing shady trees; buildings which are three or four stories high, and generally open on the sides; towers, rough grottoes, bridges, ponds, places sown with beans; thick and wild bushes or little thickets, and other varieties which afford a fine landscape."[27]

In 1774, the French Jesuit Cibot used the term "tableau," suggesting a more dramatic conception of the garden episodes. In his essay entitled "Observations sur

William Chambers's Chinese Garden, in: *Mosaic* 37 (2004) 2, pp. 41–58; Barrier/Mosser/Chiu 2004 (see note 9).

27 Carl Gustav Ekeberg, A Short Account of the Chinese Husbandry, in: *A Voyage to China and the East Indies by Peter Osbeck*, translated from the German by John Reinhold Forster, vol. 2 (1771), p. 306.

les plantes, les fleurs et les arbres de Chine qu'il est possible de se procurer en France," published in 1786, Cibot read the scenic possibilities of the Chinese gardens in the spectacle of the rich variety of nature they offered, displaying not only her most pleasant and charming aspects, but rather "her caprices, her negligence, even her faults and forgetfulness" to create a surprising garden composition.[28]

Chambers introduced the importance of pauses in the appreciation of the garden's space as a specific design strategy, and focused on the positioning of specific vantage points, marked by a seat or a pavilion, for the contemplation of the scenic views. While Ekeberg focused on the role of twisting paths in progressively revealing the garden's compositional variety and the different scenes.

Other Western travelers focused on the way in which the perception of the garden's space was modulated by the control that the layout of the garden imposed on the visitor's movement and vision. Dutch-American diplomat André Everard van Braam Houckgeest (1739–1801), who visited the imperial parks in the northwestern outskirts of Beijing together with members of the last Dutch

28 Pierre-Martial Cibot, Observations sur les plantes, les fleurs et les arbres de Chine qu'il est possible de se procurer en France, in: *Mémoires . . . des Chinois*, vol. 11, Nyon, Paris, 1786, p. 216.

embassy to China he led in 1794–1795, described some of the methods and visual devices used to screen, direct, or expand vision in the garden, that were intended to intensify the sense of surprise and, at the same time, influence the perception of the garden's real scale.[29] In describing the imperial park Qingyi yuan (Garden of Clear Ripples), van Braam focused on a large sculptural rock that had been placed just behind a gate, to occlude the view of the garden beyond it, increasing the viewer's sense of expectation. He also mentioned the unexpected and extensive views, which opened into distant landscape, beyond the park's enclosure, visually extending the physical boundaries of the park itself.

The most comprehensive account of Chinese garden design is the *Essai sur les jardins de plaisance des Chinois*, written by the French Jesuit Pierre-Martial Cibot in 1774 and published in 1782.[30] While previous accounts offered Western readers different fragments to reconstruct a complete picture of the gardens of China, Cibot's *Essai* is the first attempt by a Western observer to a theoretical treatment of Chinese garden aesthetics. Cibot arrived in China in 1759 and spent there almost 25 years, working for the Qianlong emperor first as a fountain maker and than as a botanist and gardener. His discussion is based on the Imperial gardens he was able to visit and work in, which he considered general models of Chinese garden design.[31]

The *Essai* begins with an overview of the development of Chinese gardens through time, which Cibot was the first Western author to compile. He referred to the Chinese historical records and literary sources available to him to document the ancient tradition of garden art in China, placing the Chinese garden into a historical context, and, at the same time, to state the validity of his account.

Following the historical account, Cibot explained the design strategy behind the Chinese garden, as developed during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Giving order to the information provided by other travellers previously, Cibot emphasized the garden's planned irregularity inspired by the natural landscape, its similarity to the countryside, its variety, and its continual surprises. He described the gardens of China as "an agreeable mélange of little hills and slopes, of little plains and valleys, of groves and meadows, of still waters and brooks,"[32] and explained the design strategy behind the gardens' composition "The great art of these gardens

29 André Everard van Braam Houckgeest, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, to the Court of the Emperor of China, in the Years 1794 and 1795*, 2 vols., R. Phillips, London, 1798. On Van Braam's detailed narrative of the Dutch embassy and his descriptions of the imperial parks see Carroll Brown Malone, *History of the Peking Summer Palaces Under the Ch'ing Dynasty*, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1934, pp. 119–121, and pp. 166–170.

30 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 326.

31 Bianca Maria Rinaldi, *The "Chinese Garden in Good Taste": Jesuits and Europe's Knowledge of Chinese Flora and Art of the Garden in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Martin Meidenbauer, Munich, 2006, pp. 218–230.

32 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 317.

is to copy nature in all her simplicity, to avoid her disorder, and to hide under the veil of her irregularity."[33]

But Cibot's *Essai* offered a novel richness of details. He provided an accurate vocabulary of compositional elements, and discussed the role of mountains, valleys, water features, and vegetation in the overall design. Cibot also offered a repertoire of the varied compositional possibilities for the garden's scenes and revealed the seasonal characterization of specific scenic views, that was emphasized by the botanical selection and the arrangement of plants:

> "The very interests of the single seasons must be balanced and managed so that each has its moment to prevail. Beautifully flowering peaches and cherry trees create an enchanted amphitheatre in the Spring, acacias, ash, and plane trees create bowers of verdure for Summer; Autumn has its weeping willows, its satin-leaved poplars and aspens; and Winter its cedars, its cypresses and its pines."[34]

Finally, the Jesuit emphasized the role of paths in organizing visitors' movement through the garden leading to specific viewpoints and defining the rhythm of the garden as it unfolds, so as "to prepare the visitor for surprises, and to save him from the satiation of habit."[35]

Cibot is the first author to discuss less tangible aspects beyond Chinese garden design, such as the philosophical foundations based on Daoism that created the palimpsest of meanings implicit to Chinese gardens. Indeed, he presented Chinese gardens as the expression of the complex relationship between man and nature. He explained that aesthetic appreciation of the garden was a vehicle for the search of harmony with nature, and the garden's composition was intended to awaken the same sensations resulting from the tranquil contemplation of the natural landscape: "A garden thus should be the living and animated image of everything one finds there [in nature], to engender in the soul the same sentiments, and to satisfy the eyes with the same pleasure."[36]

Western travellers' interest for Chinese garden design did not diminish throughout the nineteenth century, however, their attitude toward the gardens of China changed dramatically.[37] A new stage of nature emerged from Western accounts, as they discussed the excessively artificial naturalness of the Chinese gardens as an expression of a deformed nature. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, Chinese gardens were described in a derogatory way. Rocks, mountains, water

33 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 318.

34 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 325.

35 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 325.

36 Cibot, 1782 (see note 6), p. 318.

37 Bianca Maria Rinaldi, Weeping Willows and Dwarfed Trees: Plants in Chinese Gardens under Western Eyes, in: Yota Batsaki, Sarah Burke-Cahalan and Anatole Tchikine (eds.), *The Botany of Empire in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C., 2016, pp. 73–92.

features, and scattered plantings considered to be the main characteristics of the natural appearance of Chinese garden design were devaluated by Western observers as being too elaborate, forced, distant from the simplicity of nature itself, and therefore, finally, unnatural or possibly even monstrous.[38] This change of attitude mirrored a more general change in Western perception of China that, from a positive model became a weak and decadent country, the prototype of despotism and stagnation.[39]

Criticism of the Chinese civilization and of the Chinese social and political system constituted the justification of the two conflicts, which England and its allies used to impose on China expansion of their trading privileges: the Opium War (1840–1842) and the Arrow War, or Second Opium War (1856–1860). The Opium Wars marked a period of profound changes and political turmoil in China eventually leading to the collapse of the Qing empire in 1911. This second military campaign was capped by the looting and burning of one of the symbols of Chinese imperial power, the park of Yuanming yuan, near Beijing, in 1860 by the joint Anglo-French military expedition led by Lord Elgin and Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gros.[40]

In many accounts by Western travellers, Yuanming yuan was presented as the finest expression of Chinese garden art.[41] With its destruction in 1860, China was deprived of one of its most powerful symbols of cultural identity and political unity. At the same time, the European aggression had also damaged Europe's own history by eliminating the park that more than any other had influenced the evolution of the Western garden art, thanks to the accounts of those who had the privilege of seeing it.

38 Clunas 1997 (see note 8), pp. 23–25.

39 Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif., 2010, pp. 23–70.

40 For a recent study on the destruction of Yuanming yuan and its implications in the European image of China see Greg M. Thomas, The Looting of Yuanming and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe, in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* 7 (Autumn 2008), 2 Seiten (http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/autumn08/93-the-looting-of-yuanming-and-the-translation-of-chinese-art-in-europe). On the looting of Yuanming yuan see James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2003, pp. 74–111; and also Erik Ringmar, *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

41 For a recent discussion on Western accounts of Yuanming yuan and its destruction, see Erik Ringmar, Malice in Wonderland: Dreams of the Orient and Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China, in: *Journal of World History*, 22, (2011), 2, pp. 273–297.