

The Chinoiserie style and its interpretations in urban park design from a historical and contemporary perspective, based on selected examples

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Abstract

This paper discusses landscape design inspired by Chinese tradition and symbolism. The authors briefly presented the basics of Chinese tradition in the establishment of gardens and parks, their elements, symbolism and the messages they convey, in the context of the interpretation of these traditions in the design of parks established in the Chinoiserie style outside China, mainly in Europe, both in the past and at present. This study also explores the problem of the poor state of the environment, especially in urban areas, which is largely related to the shortage of green space, including parks and gardens. The lack of these spaces and, at the same time, the need to create recreational yet visually appealing spaces for the urban bourgeoisie has led to a re-emergence of Chinese landscape design traditions. One example of a contemporary implementation of a Chinoiserie-style garden is the Monte Palace Tropical Garden in Funchal, the capital of Madeira.

Keywords: landscape architecture, park, Chinese architecture, Chinoiserie style, parks, Monte Palace Tropical Garden in Funchal

1. Introduction

The deteriorating state of the environment currently faced by almost every country in the world prompts researchers, urban planners and designers to seek relevant solutions. This state is also caused by the constant shrinkage of green areas in cities, which in turn is linked to the increasing development height and density and the growing number of cars. All of this leads to a deterioration in air quality in towns and cities, with residents starting to spend more and more weekends and holidays outside the city and even moving from the city to suburban areas.

In order to counteract this situation, a policy of so-called ‘greening’ of urban spaces has been attempted in cities since the end of the 20th century, consisting of establishing new parks and garden squares and revitalising and making available existing ones. In order to make these spaces attractive to residents, modern playgrounds, senior-friendly green spaces or dog parks are often established. It is important that these parks are also visually attractive. To this end, they are often given an exotic look by creating, for example, ‘Chinese’ or ‘Japanese’ landscape corners (Yang, Volkman, 2010).

This choice of Chinese or Japanese motifs is actually not accidental, as both China and Japan have developed their own original landscape design traditions over the centuries, based on a respect for nature. This attitude to nature was also religiously conditioned (Hobhouse, 2002: 319–380).

The fascination with exotic landscape design traditions in countries outside China and Japan had already taken place. As a classic example, one can cite the Chinoiserie or ‘Chinese’ style, which spread in European countries in the 18th century, but also later (Majdecki, 1972: 246–282; Hobhouse, 2002: 319–380).

Contemporary examples of parks with Chinese (and also Japanese) elements are in fact contemporary versions of the Chinoiserie phenomenon (Zachariasz, 2016: 167–205).

2. Objective, method and state of research

The aim of this study was to analyse the phenomenon of Chinoiserie in the 18th century and in contemporary conditions. The research was based on such research methods as archival queries and the literature review, synthesis and analysis, as well as local site visits.

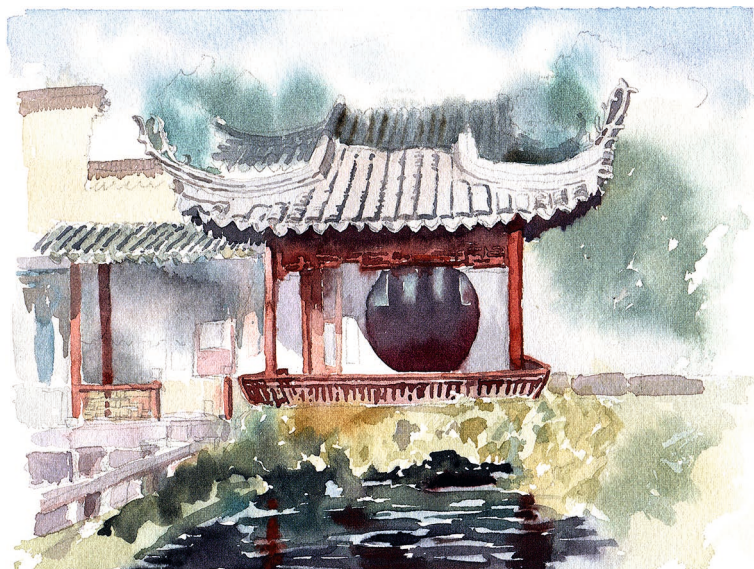


Fig. 1. Pavilion in Liu Yuan garden.
Watercolour by Chang Peng, 2020.
Watercolour (source: Archive of KNUBA)

An important stage of the research was to compile the state of research in the subject area. To this end, publications in the following areas were analysed:

- ▶ protection of the historic landscape (Petrušonis, 2018: 39–49; Pujia, 2016: 213–218; Spiridon, Sandu, 2016: 87–92; Spiridon, Sandu, Stratulat, 2017: 81–88);
- ▶ Chinese architecture and landscape architecture (Chang, 2017: 30–32; Ivashko, Chernyshev et al., 2020: 60–66; Ivashko, Kuśnierz-Krupa, 2019: 78–85; Ivashko, Kuzmenko, et al., 2019: 98–105; Kohl, 2018; Li, Q., 2019; Majdecki, 1972: 246–282; Hobhouse, 2002: 319–380; Orlenko, Dyomin, et al., 2020: 499–512; Orlenko, Ivashko, 2019: 171–190; Qiao, Li, et al., 2016: 435–447; Xinian, 2017);
- ▶ buildings and gardens designed in the Chinoiserie style (Janicka, M., 2011: 32–143; Tatarkiewicz, 1987; Zachariasz, 2016: 167–205; Werner, 2018: 138; Golosova 2010: 238–242; Yang, Volkman, 2010; Howarth, 2008: 6–7; Dijkgraaf, 2020: 17; Quintal, 2009: 71–93; Silva, Carvalho, 2023: 1–7; Albergaria, 2017: 187–207).

3. Historic and contemporary Chinoiserie-style gardens

As mentioned above, Chinoiserie-style parks were not an analogy of Chinese parks, in fact they were rather a loose interpretation of Chinese landscape design traditions. In Europe, such parks became the privilege of the upper classes, whereas in China traditional gardens were owned by representatives of different social groups – from emperors to officials and merchants. It is significant that these gardens were planned according to a shared set of principles and had similar components and design methods, but a different scale of landscape presentation, different sizes and garden furniture and architecture forms (Fig. 1, 2). Sometimes there were small garden pavilions in imperial and private gardens, but their decoration was different and more luxurious, although the composition and form may have been similar.

European Chinoiserie-style parks were not direct equivalents of Chinese gardens, primarily because they were not based on the essential principles of Chinese landscape design, but were primarily established for the entertainment of their owners, as a place of recreation. In China, the planning of a new garden took into account the requirements of *feng shui*, the orientation of the pavilions, and the list of landscape paintings that were to be included. Many of these had hidden meanings related to the principles of *feng shui* or the philosophy of Buddhism and Taoism, which were clearly visible.

Thus, for example, the tradition of winding paths and making it impossible to see the entire garden from a distance is linked to the principles of *feng shui*, while the common design of a lake with artificial mountains is linked to the traditions of Taoism and the worship of immortals. In addition, the tradition of landscape design in China was inextricably linked to other arts such as ink painting, calligraphy and poetry. Thus, some landscapes referred to the Buddhist *shan shui* ink painting style ('mountains and waters'), the entrances to the pavilions were decorated with calligraphic inscriptions on plaques, and the names of the pavilions referred to the lines of famous poems.

European attempts to fill Chinoiserie parks with the same poetic content had a slightly different character. This can be seen in names like 'Great Caprice', 'Little Caprice', 'Column of Sorrows', 'Column of the End of the World', 'Monument to the Fathers', 'Temple of Friendship', etc. These were names devoid of philosophical or religious overtones, a manifestation of an eccentric attitude and a search for the exotic and the entertaining.

European parks did not adhere to the essential principle of making it impossible to see an entire Chinese garden from afar. Here, landscapes often overlapped, as in a kaleidoscope. On the one hand, this blocked the path of evil

demons from the heavens, while on the other, it symbolised the whirl of natural phenomena and their cyclicity.

Instead, the Sanssouci Park in Potsdam, for example, has a regular layout, where the main thrust of the design is precisely the presence of distant vistas and a large number of long, straight alleys. The principle of looking at the pavilion itself also fundamentally changed. Whereas in China man-made objects were considered secondary and subordinate to nature, in Europe they become accentual, luxurious, taking over as the main attraction of the park. We can see a vivid example of the incompatibility of the pompous pavilion with the natural environment in the Chinese Pavilion in Sanssouci Park with its gilded decoration.

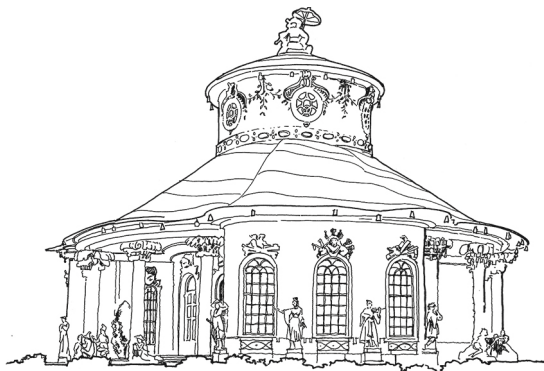


Fig. 2. Chinese pavilion in Sanssouci park.
Drawing by Chang Peng, 2020. Drawing
(source: Archive of KNUBA)

Therefore, in the case of Chinoiserie-style pavilions, it is more correct to speak of a transformation of borrowed motifs without a deep understanding of their essence (Fig. 3). Named as Chinoiserie, the buildings do not in fact bear the hallmarks of traditional Chinese park architecture, and not only because of their location in a setting far different from that of China, but also in terms of composition and form morphology. This was due, among other things, to the fact that the architects who designed such parks had, for the most part, never been to China and in principle knew little about traditional Chinese architecture. They mainly obtained information about it from sources available in Europe.



Fig. 3. Chinese pavilion in Sanssouci park
(photo by Michal Krupa, 2021)

It can therefore be concluded that the main differences between Chinoiserie parks and traditional Chinese gardens are:

- ▶ regularity and linearity versus irregularity and lack of distant vistas;
- ▶ the failure to consider the orientation of small pavilions according to the requirements of *feng shui*;
- ▶ the dominance of architecture over the natural environment versus conforming to the surrounding landscape;
- ▶ the building becomes the main element of the park, not the landscape;
- ▶ the European park is subordinated to a single composition and oriented towards the main building, while the traditional Chinese garden consists of a set of separate, consecutive landscape images;
- ▶ in European parks there were no specific canons regarding the specific location of a pavilion in a particular 'landscape image', this determined

- the picturesqueness of the landscape and had no philosophical or mystical overtones;
- ▶ the European park was not intended to beautify the existing landscape by adding architectural objects, it was a means of entertainment in an exotic setting. At the same time, some traditional Chinese landscape techniques were rejected, such as the Lake of the Immortals with the Mountains of the Immortals, as well as the techniques of 'borrowing landscape', 'landscape as a picture in a frame', 'garden within a garden', etc.

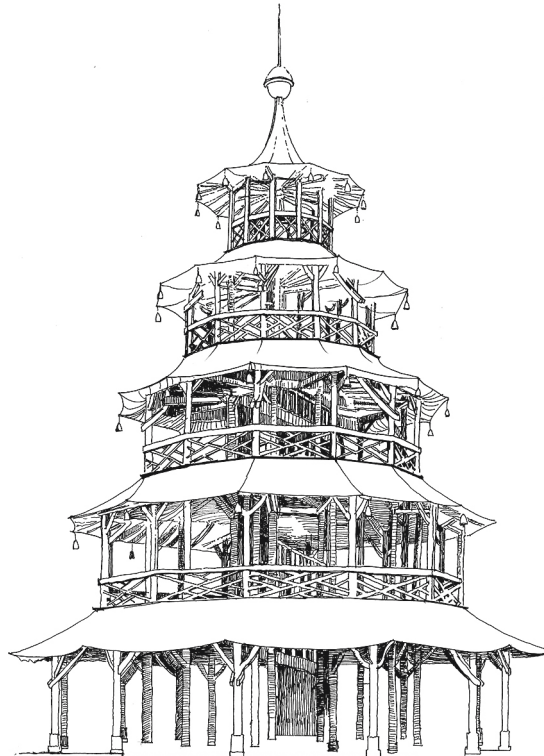


Fig. 4. Chinese arbour in the English garden in Munich. Drawing by Chang Peng, 2020, Drawing (source: Archive of KNUBA)

This inconsistency of European parks with the principles of traditional Chinese landscape design has led to controversy over the meaning of the term 'Chinoiserie'. For example, O. Golosova, after analysing 47 European parks from a certain period, introduced her own term 'Anglo-Chinese park', thus emphasising the synthesis of the natural English park and some elements borrowed from Chinese landscape design (Golosova, 2010: 238–242).

It is significant that the characteristics of the Anglo-Chinese park that she defined correspond mainly to parks categorised as Chinoiserie-style parks. Their suitability lies in their designation exclusively for the aristocracy (which was not the case in China), the large size of the garden plot, the presence of small 'Chinese' pavilions, the regularity of the layout, location on flat ground and the presence of water bodies.

Thus, another non-identity of Chinoiserie parks and gardens is the exclusion of active terrain from their imagery. In China, arbours were deliberately placed on accentuating terrain forms, or if there were none, artificial mountains were created. Similarly, the combination of a large number of miniature landscape images was not used in the Chinoiserie parks.

Furthermore, the morphology of small pavilion forms was mimicked inconsistently. In fact, if a pavilion had upward curving roof corners, it was already considered 'Chinese'. However, if we analyse the forms of pavilions in gardens across China, it can be seen that these roofs have been repeatedly modified and subject to local natural and climatic conditions.

The very function of the pavilions was also changed. In China, garden pavilions were clearly divided according to their use – there were tea pavilions, meditation pavilions, fish watching pavilions, music pavilions, etc., whereas in Europe the list of uses actually narrows down to just that of a ‘tea room’, although even here not all the traditional furniture elements for the tea ceremony are present.

If there was some imitation of ‘pavilions on bridges’, as in the Arboretum Oleksandriya in Bila Tserkva, there was even less resemblance.

Thus, in contrast to China, where the pavilion traditionally took on the mystical significance of a place of human contact with the universe, in Europe, Chinoiserie-style pavilions became primarily an exotic element of attraction and entertainment, thus losing their original meaning.

The Chinoiserie style borrowed Chinese traditions by simplifying them: in fact, traditional landscape design techniques were not carried over, only a limited list of architectural forms were modified, namely those that Europeans associated with China. Such elements included, in particular, the roofs of a large one with upward curving ends, images of dragons and red pillar supports. This led to the ‘theatrical effect’ created by these structures, which looked artificially brought into the natural environment. In fact, the ‘China Pavilion’ in the Sanssouci Park is an ordinary monarch’s pavilion, decorated only with strange, exotic decoration. It has retained none of the features of the Chinese imperial pavilions – from the morphology of the forms to the polychrome. In fact, it is a European Baroque pavilion with a Chinese name.





Fig. 5a, b, c, d, e, f. 'Chinese' garden in the Monte Palace Tropical Garden in Funchal, the capital of Madeira (photo by Michał Krupa, 2023)

The same 'theatrical' effect is observed in the 'Chinese' gazebo at Tsarskoye Selo near St Petersburg. Its composite construction does not correspond to Chinese traditions, also the layout of several separate masses, windows and entrances are not 'Chinese', as are the contours of the roofs, which are simplified compared to Chinese pavilions. The colour scheme also does not correspond to Chinese traditions. Even less resemblance to Chinese pavilions can be seen in the gazebos in the Oleksandriya and Sofiyivka parks.

A similar 'theatrical' effect can be observed in the Monte Palace Tropical Garden (Jardim Tropical e Museu Monte Palace), located on Monte Hill in the capital of Madeira, Funchal, where a Chinese garden has also been established within a vast botanical garden with an area of 70,000 m². The history of the garden actually begins in the 18th century, when the English consul Charles Murray bought the property south of the Monte church and transformed it into the beautiful Quinta do Prazer estate. In 1897, the next owner, Alfredo Rodrigues, built a palatial residence here, which was later transformed into the Monte Palace Hotel. The hotel was visited by many guests who appreciated the beauty of the garden and the views of Funchal. After Rodrigues' death in 1943, his family did not continue the hotel business and sold the property. Then, after several changes of ownership, in 1987 the garden became the property of José Berardo, who, inspired by his travels to China, the tradition and culture of the East, decided to create oriental gardens here as an attempt to recreate this culture, linked to Buddhism, with its respect for nature and its

highly symbolic elements in Portugal, on Madeira. Within the park, in addition to bridges, gates and pavilions, there are many sculptures symbolising mythical animals from the Orient, which are usually found at entrances to temples, where they act as guards. There are also Buddhist sculptures, e.g., of dragons, stone seats with Oriental decorations, lanterns, and small pagodas. The sculptural decorations are harmonised with the greenery, including various species of tree ferns, whose colours contrast with the red and black of the 'Chinese' bridges and railings. The park is currently managed by the Berardo Foundation, which has modernised and restored the Monte Palace Tropical Garden, bringing it to its current state. In summary, it can be said that in Funchal, by means of a series of small, architectural elements and features such as sculptures, bridges, gates with traditionally curved canopies, pagodas, etc., an attempt was made to create a contemporary 'Chinese garden', inspired by Eastern traditions. As a result, it only succeeded in creating the illusion of a traditional Chinese park space, although it must be admitted that being in it is a positive feeling. Nevertheless, the randomness of the compositional solutions, detached, among other things, from the principles of feng shui, is not a 'sincere' design, but only an imitation of a traditional Chinese park space.

4. Summary and conclusions

The Chinoiserie phenomenon flourished in the 18th century and had a significant impact on the landscape design of the time. However, it was a style that did not directly carry over Chinese traditions, which the authors believe was correct. It merely interpreted them by creating a modified version of traditional Chinese garden furniture and architecture in European countries.

Despite the fact that later, i.e., in the 19th and early 20th centuries, interest in Chinoiserie declined, in modern times we are seeing its revival in the design of parks and gardens all over the world, as exemplified by the garden in Funchal, Madeira. As mentioned in the introduction, this is due to the fact that ancient Chinese traditions concerning the 'human–nature' relationship are now being analysed against the background of environmental problems. On the other hand, the use of Chinese motifs in contemporary parks is attractive and becomes one of their assets, especially in times when people seek tranquillity, a place for contemplation and reflection. Therefore, it seems that Eastern canons and traditions in garden design are still relevant and can successfully inspire contemporary parks established in large cities all over the world.

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