



## Chapter 7

# The Impact of Chinese Culture on European Landscape Design

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**Abstract:** The English garden design style and the landscape garden movement became the most emblematic cultural achievement of England in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century. The natural garden style proved to be the symbol of the liberal philosophy and the enlightened way of thinking. But the English landscape garden, which can be seen as an idealized view of nature, is inspired by the classical landscape paintings and is also influenced by the classic Chinese gardens, which had recently been described by European travellers. The interest for Chinese culture, architecture and garden design spread around the British island and inspired the talented garden designers. The gardens of Chambers created a new section in the picturesque landscape gardens, the so called anglo-chinoiserie gardens where eastern, mainly Chinese architectural motives and garden elements have been used in most cases without integrating the Chinese nature philosophy. This first, more or less formal effects of Chinese garden design on European landscape architecture were overwritten by garden designers and horticulturalist during the gardenesque period of the early 19th century when great variety in plant design was taken into the focus of landscape architecture

**Keywords:** English landscape garden, Chinese garden design, Freedom of Nature



## Introduction

At the turn of the 18th century, at the very beginning of English landscape garden movement, Sir William Temple - writer, scientist, diplomat and Chinese fine arts and landscape portrait enthusiast - wrote for the first time about the formal aspects of Chinese garden design: "...for there may be other forms, wholly irregular, that may ... have more beauty than any of the others... something of this I have seen in some places, but I heard more of it from others who have lived much among the Chinese; a people whose way of thinking seems to lie as wide of ours in Europe as their country does." (Liu 2008)

Chinese garden culture, with its more than 2 thousand-year-old design tradition, is a unique phenomenon in the history of landscape architecture - and in human culture, too. It is the oldest, continuous garden and landscape concept in the world, dating back to the Shang dynasty in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, when the transformation of natural landscapes arrived at a stage where gardens for pleasure, recreation, joy and laughter appeared. The reason for this long history may reside in the ancient philosophy that has ruled the Chinese society for millennia. Chinese garden design has two definitive roots, ones from the ancient cultural period of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Confucianism, on one hand, and Taoism on the other, take on board the complexity

**Picture 1. The Garden of Perfect Brightness**    **Picture 2. Natural landscape of the Li river**



Yuan Ming Yuan Imperial garden of Chi'en-lung, 18th c.



of the world: the first explains and interpret societal relationships, and places moral and ethical commitment to the forefront of human behaviour and manners; while the second, Taoism, defines man's role and place in nature as a whole. Chinese gardens are therefore transformed and humanised natural landscapes, and have a deep symbolism. The levels of garden spaces are strictly proscribed, so there is a strong emphasis on hills, rock and water - as with the totality of Taoist yin and yang. The architecture is always strictly geometrical and symmetrical, representing the clear and subordinated connections of society as defined by Confucianism. (Keswick 1978) Vegetation provides the third level, with forms that are as natural and as wild as one can imagine.

The Chinese garden design reflects a deep understanding of nature and its forms. They are composed as a series of landscape portraits, as pictures to be seen from individual points, from windows and from the corridors of a set of buildings (Tregear 1980).

**Picture 3. The Garden of Perfect Brightness with its huge lake covered with Lotus flowers**





This is the way the garden changes its character and meaning from one specific viewpoint to another; and this is how Time, the fourth dimension, is built into the garden concept, with a typical Chinese philosophy: the garden is not perceived in a continuum, changing its space forms and direction as one moves step by step, walking around - observation and understanding offer themselves from one standpoint, and then comes the next standpoint, as in a series of separate pictures taken of the garden. Planting design had by traditional Chinese gardens does not make use of a wide variety of ornamental plants; for it is not quantity or variety or variability which takes precedence; it is the decorative appearance and the deep symbolical meaning that are at the forefront of planting design. Trees with irregular, strange shapes are much beloved as they present the freedom of Nature. There is no grass field, meadow or pasture – there are huge water surfaces instead, often with a lotus plant covering that symbolises the purity that is revered in Buddhist philosophy.

## **The impact of Chinese Culture on Europe and the English Landscape Garden Movement**

China has been known to European travellers and tradesmen since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, yet the arrival of Chinese philosophy, together with its traditional attitude to nature, goes back a good 300 years. Since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese garden culture was greatly appreciated all over Europe. It even became a fashionable idea in the ineffectual and then popular feng-shui garden creations. The first authentic impressions of Chinese culture came in 1687, when translations of Chinese classics appeared in France and the first Chinese travellers arrived in England. The magical Confucian virtues were published in Leibniz's writing. Thanks to several Jesuits - who not only travelled to China but were able to accept the ancient culture and integrate themselves into the educated classes - "China appeared as a highly developed culture, like that of ancient Greece or Rome or Egypt, but unlike those, a living culture". (Perkins 2004)

Ancient Greek and Roman culture is reflected in classical landscape portraits of Poussin, Lorain and Rosa and many followers of landscape painters. Their masterpieces are not only to be admired in the great collections of wealthy English noblemen - they reflect a new way of thinking about Nature and harmony. Though the cradle of ancient European culture, the Mediterranean region was easy to reach





for members of noble society, who regularly went on tours to Italy for self education and also to collect masterpieces - yet China remained a “far eastern” world where only Christian missionaries, Jesuits and travellers could go (on foot) until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, Chinese philosophy was approved of and became important in Europe, though there were no more visual hints of Chinese landscapes and gardens – instead, many pieces of fine arts, collected and transported to Europe for emperors and aristocrats, who used to be fanatical collectors. As can be seen with the Italian landscape, Chinese paintings, porcelains and pottery were the most easily readable pieces of culture, with many admirable pictures of natural forms, animals, plants and also landscapes and gardens. The examples of naturally-formed gardens and the interesting, irregular shapes of plants were seen as the freedom had by Nature.

Philosophers, artists, poets, scientists and writers, who played a determining role in the birth of the new garden style and the landscape garden movement, also belonged among the admirers of Chinese culture. Addison wrote in a 1712 essay: “Writers who have given us an account of China tell us that the inhabitants of that country laugh at the plantations of Europeans, which are laid out by the rule of Line” (Addison 1712). Pope was one of the first garden makers who reconstructed his strictly formal garden of his villa behind the Thames in a way learned both from classical landscape portraits and Chinese paintings. “In laying out a garden, the first and chief thing to be considered is the genius of the place.” (Batey 1999) His garden was a famous meeting place of his age for artists and Whig politicians, and in this way his attempt to restructure the strong geometry and symmetry of the garden played an important role in the birth of the idea and practice of irregular gardens.

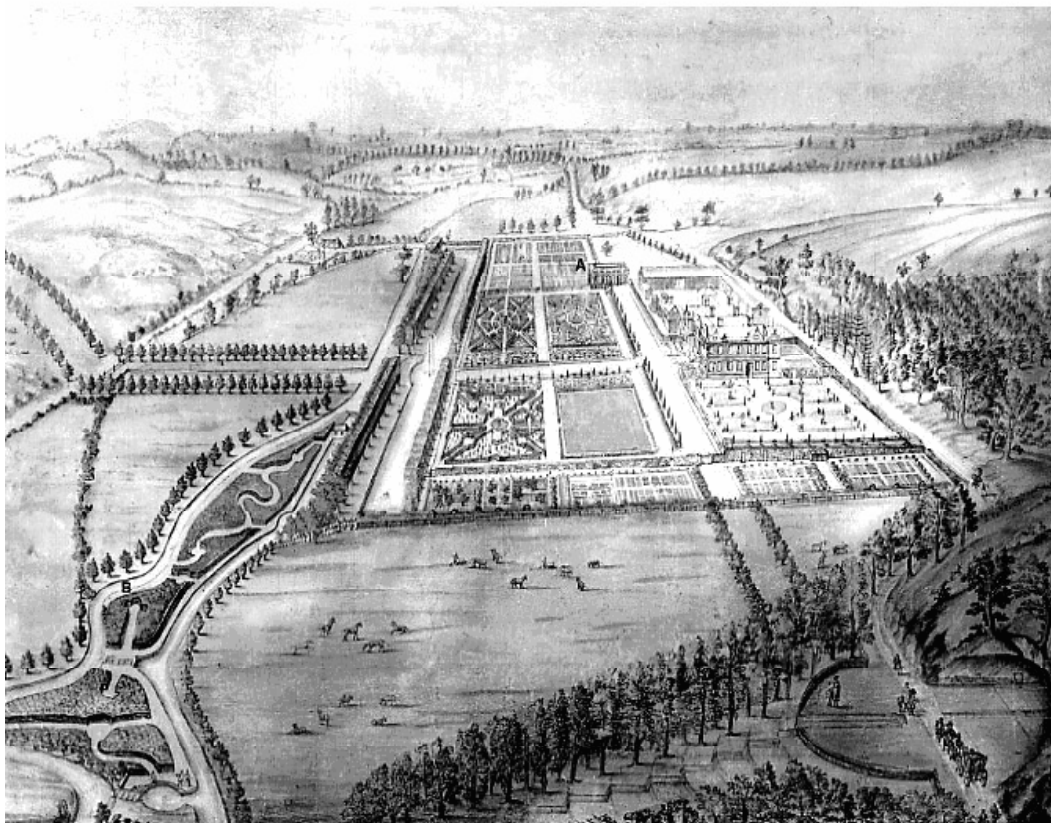
Temple, who was enthusiastic about Chinese ways of planting, which is “without any Orders or Dispositions of Parts”, created a new expression: Sharawadgi, a new sort of beauty of forms that is wholly irregular (Temple 1685). “And whoever observes the work upon the best Indian gowns or the painting upon their best screens or purcellans, will find their beauty all of this kind, without order. But I hardly should advise any such attempts in the figure of gardens among us”. However, it was Sir William Temple, who, as a passionate collector of Chinese paintings and porcelains, might have learnt about the natural space forming from Chinese decorative arts. His garden (which lay about two miles from Famham, Surrey) is a very early example for the so-called serpentine style English garden; for an engraving from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century shows a meandering, winding stream running within the formal garden. The house is situated in a valley, surrounded on every side by hills, and has a stream running through the garden; the attractive, serpentine



type of stream, with its strong curves and wimples, do not remind the spectator of a natural landscape – indeed, it may seem to give the same artificial element in the landscape as would a traditional formal garden, with its parterres and allées. Here, the delightful running of the stream reflects a brand new way of design.

Temple, who was an avid collector of Chinese paintings and porcelains, learned the natural space-forming style from the Chinese decorative arts. Looking at the serpentine-shaped stream, a strong similarity can be observed between the meandering river form and dragons, the emblematic figures in Chinese paintings and on porcelains. This daring and interesting hypothesis is hard to prove, but the fact that the meandering river is not a natural form in that part of England means that the idea is not so bold. Temple's adoration of Chinese culture was proved by his will: that his heart be put into a China Bason and buried under a Sun-dial in his garden. (Bason is the ghost of an ancient Chinese military class that served the Tao family.)

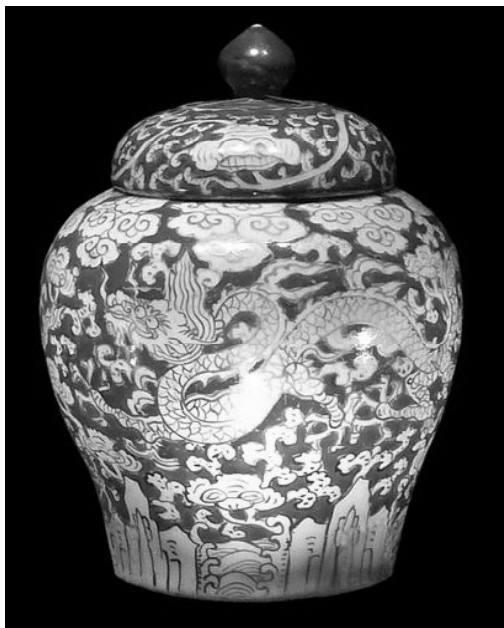
**Picture 4. More Park, the home of Sir William Temple, with its irregular, serpentine-shaped garden embedded in the hilly landscape of Surrey county**





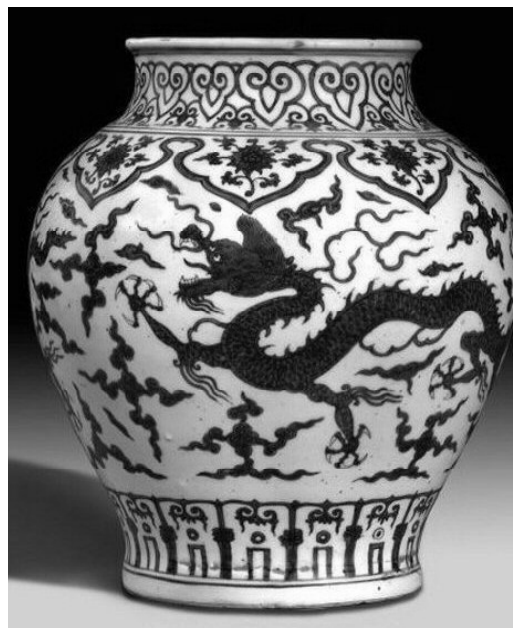
Here we see Sir William Temple's More Park at Farnham, Surrey, with a traditional, formal garden and landscape character, as well as the new naturally-formed, meandering stream. The serpentine route of the river recalls the traditionally ornamental element of Chinese porcelains. The dragon tail shape has the same artificial form in this landscape as with the late Baroque garden structure. It is true that dragons are considered evil in European culture, yet Chinese dragons are ancient mythological creatures that are portrayed as long, scaled, serpentine animals with (generally) four legs; and they traditionally symbolize power, strength, excellence and good luck. The Emperor of China used the dragon as a symbol of his imperial power.

**Picture 5. Ming-covered red jar with dragon, from the Jiajing reign, 16<sup>th</sup> century**



Source: <http://mannaismayaadventure.com>

**Picture 6. Chinese porcelain jar with blue and white dragon. Ming dynasty, Jiajing period, 16<sup>th</sup> century**



Source: 71550948.jpg Photo Gibson Antiques





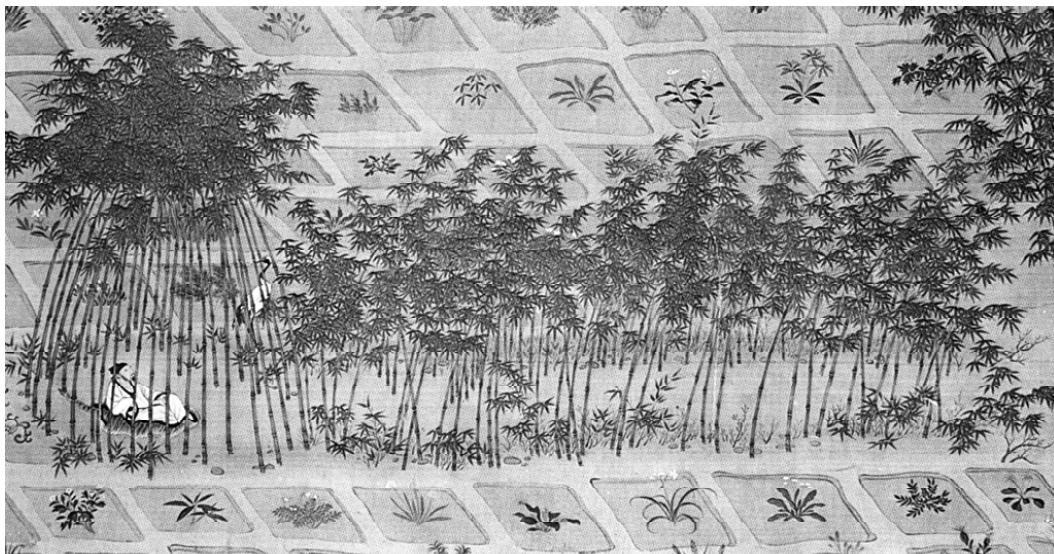
**Picture 7. Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician, Ming dynasty, dated 1551**



Source: metmuseum.org



**Picture 8. Painting of a bamboo garden with a monk**







Until the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century no written description of Chinese garden design was known. The first complete introduction to Chinese gardens came via a Jesuit, P ere Attiret, who served Emperor Chi'ien-lung as a painter. The emperor was a very keen gardener, who constructed a garden/landscape complex of agricultural land, uncultivated and natural landscape along with palaces and gardens. The imperial garden - the Garden of Perfect Brightness or Yuan Ming Yuan - became well known in Europe after Attiret's book was published in 1752.

## **China and Chinese Garden Design Became Fully Appreciated and Fashionable in Europe**

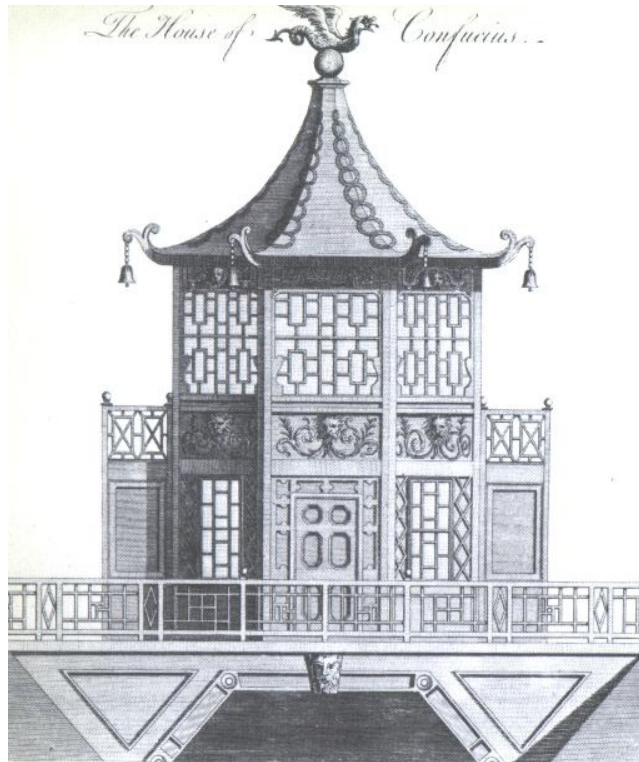
An interest in Chinese culture, architecture and garden design spread throughout Britain and gave inspiration to talented garden makers and designers. In about 1738, Viscount Cobham added a Chinese House to his garden at Stowe, which in itself was already full of political metaphors. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Princess Augusta commissioned William Chambers with the design of a garden pavilion for Kew gardens called the House of Confucius. The gardens of Chambers later opened up a new area for picturesque landscape garden, the so-called Anglo-chinoiserie garden, where eastern (mainly Chinese) architectural motives and garden elements were utilised, in most cases without integrating the Chinese nature philosophy.

These first, more or less formal effects of Chinese garden design on European landscape architecture were taken over by garden designers and horticulturalists in the gardenesque period, when a great variety of plant design became the focus of landscape architecture. In the 19th century, the gardening interests of the West had turned towards displays of rare and exotic plants. Plant collectors discovered a paradise in China. Garden borders and woods soon began to blossom with species of azalea and rhododendron - ones found in the wild foothills of the Himalayas! Indeed, many of these had never been cultivated in the gardens of China.





**Picture 9. The House of Confucius at Kew,  
designed by William Chambers**



Source: [nttreasurehunt.wordpress.com](http://nttreasurehunt.wordpress.com)





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