

YUAN MING YUAN - TRADITIONAL CHINESE GARDEN

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Abstract. *Chinese traditional gardens are naturalistic style. Although they date back more than 4,000 years ago, it is only in the 13-th century when they were brought to Europe, in Marco Polo's writings. The European gardens noticed not clearly distinguished influences, with only one exception: the garden of the Old Summer Palace - Yuan Ming Yuan. Considered to be the eastern Versailles, Yuan Ming is almost one thousand years of alternating "greatness and decline". The Garden had a continuous development since the eleventh century, with a peak during the Qing dynasty, in the eighteenth century. Although the palace was spread over 350 hectares, having 150 sectors, most of Asian design, the biggest and the most impressive one was the European sector: a Renaissance garden with baroque elements, with 10 palaces European like- furnished, including plants from Europe. Disaster came in autumn, 1680 when the English-French armies devastated, burnt and plundered everything in just three days, as a result of the emperor's refusal to trade tea and silk for opium. The Chinese people, 150 years after the disaster, decided not to restore or rehabilitate anything, opting for conservation - as a proof of humiliation of their culture. Efforts today are directed only towards regaining valuables from the museums of the world, or from private collections.*

Key words: chinese gardens, traditional gardens, Yuan Ming Yuan

Rezumat. *Grădinile tradiționale chinezești întruchipează ceea ce se consideră în arta peisageră, stilul liber peisager. Deși tradiția și dezvoltarea lor datează de mai bine de 4000 ani, abia în secolul XIII au pătruns în Europa, odată cu scrierile lui Marco Polo. În sens invers, cultura europeană nu a avut influențe vizibile, doar cu o singură excepție: Grădina Vechiului Palat de Vară – Yuan Ming Yuan. Considerat „Versailles-ul estic”, Yuan Ming Yuan are o istorie de aproape un mileniu ce poate fi cuprinsă în două cuvinte: „măreție și declin”. Grădina a evoluat începând din secolul XI, atingând apogeul în timpul dinastiei Qing –secolul XVIII. Deși ansamblul conținea 150 sectoare (350ha), majoritatea de inspirație asiatică, unul dintre ele, cel mai mare și cel mai opulent era sectorul european: o grădină renașcentistă cu elemente baroce, având zece palate mobilate asemenea celor europene și elemente vegetale aduse tot din Europa. Dezastrul se produce în toamna anului 1680, când la refuzul împăratului de a primi în schimbul ceaiului și mătăsii, opium, armatele anglo-franceze devastează, jefuiesc și ard din temelii totul în trei zile. Chinezii, după 150 ani de la dezastru, au luat decizia de a nu reabilita sau restaura nimic, optând pentru conservare – ca mărturie a umilinței culturii unui popor. Eforturile de astăzi sunt direcționate doar pentru recuperarea pieselor de valoare aflate în marile muzee ale lumii sau care și-au pierdut urma în colecțiile private.*

Cuvinte cheie: grădini chinezești, grădini tradiționale, Yuan Ming Yuan

INTRODUCTION

A Chinese garden is the result of a perfect assembly between nature and man made constructions; a limited space which conveys the beauty of nature; an improvement brought to nature, which, at the same time, will evidentiate the efforts the constructor made for each little corner of it.

A traditional garden is a manual assembly of rock structures, little lakes with fish and all kinds of walls, pavillions, bridges or corridors, using flowers, grasses, little trees and trees, together with cosmic elements: the light of the moon, sun beams, sea breeze. All these intermingle in an artistic entity in which man and nature can coexist harmoniously.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Yuan Ming Yuan is the main Chinese garden studied and it is at the basis of our research study. The number of architectural pieces or greenery did not help our investigation, as all Chinese traditional gardens use more or less the same elements, considered „compulsory”. The secret, that is, the art in itself was rendered by the way all these were exposed, mixed together, or by the use of other effects as light and darkness, wind, sound, rain or fog. The mistery was revealed by the curving lines - inspired from the Chinese rice crops. These are lines which flow tridimensionally, either in rocks or in water, vegetation, or architectural pieces.

The research methods used included: *independent and systematic observation, case study, analysis, synthesis*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study of the traditional Chinese gardens, of their evolution and development from ancient times, the search for the origins and influences, or the deciphering of symbols, expressions and execution methods are hard, time and effort consuming work.

Most times, a systematic description of a garden, led us nowhere. Words were too few and their connotations impossible to translate. They failed to convey the spiritual state the story of garden should have.

The traditional Chinese gardens embody the free landscape architectural style. Although their tradition and development dates back more than 4 000 years, it is only in the thirteenth century that they entered Europe, by Marco Polo's writings. The English were the first to embrace this style in the eighteenth century.

The European culture was not clearly influenced, with one exception only: the Garden of the Old Summer Imperial Palace - Yuan Ming Yuan. Considered to be the "eastern Versailles", Yuan Ming Yuan has a history which dates back a millenium and which can be described in two words: "greatness" and "decline" (Keswick Maggie, 2003).

The Garden of the Old Summer Imperial Palace - Yuanmingyuan is an unique project, originally designed (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Yuan Ming Yuan – period before 1860,
(www.chinatownology.com)

Built even since the Jin de East dynasty (1115-1234), it continued to expand continuously, during different historical periods of foreign dominations, and, during the Qing period it became the luxurious assembly of the imperial family.

Three big parks- **Yuanmingyuan** (westernly disposed), **Wanchunyuan** (southernly disposed) and **Changchunyuan** (easternly

disposed), around Fuhai lake made up the garden, which, begun in the XII-th Century, will gain fame only in 1709, and will last for 150 years more, till 1860. The assembly was spread over 350 hectares, as the Forbidden Palace. (Chen G., 2007; Qiugxi L., 2001).

The whole complex is said to have been composed of 100 palaces, temples, pavilions, bridges and pagodas, enriched by natural gifts of Nature, as lakes, rocks, hills, steep slopes, caves or rivers. Known to have been one of the most impressive open air museums in the world, also named “Garden of Gardens”, this was made up of over 150 scenes which contained a rare flora, brought from all remote corners of China.

Yuanmingyuan contained four dominant species with more than 80 varieties with flowers and special aspect: pine, bamboo, willow and lotus.

Buildings in Yuanmingyuan covered about 16 hectares of the total surface, expensive constructions made of rare materials, very carefully made. China gathered in there all its precious: jade sculptures, paintings, books, jewelry, extremely expensive porcelain. The buildings served as multifunctional places: from houses or government halls to relaxation and entertainment spots. Theatricality was added to natural picturesque environment. More than that, Yuanmingyuan was an imperial art museum wich contained rare books, treasures, cultural artifacts.

Yuanmingyuan assembly is not an ordinary garden. Constructors were brought from all China in order to create scenes of an amazing refinement. Also, European architectural influences can be noticed. Kanghsi Emperor called European missionaries, an important influence having the Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1747-1759) who brought something from the Italian Renaissance. Palaces were build in baroque style and furnished like the ones in Europe.

The well known novelist Victor Hugo appreciated it as being *"a work of art which cannot ever be matched"*, and that *"all collections in French churches are fading when compared to this magnificent, splendid oriental museum"* (Keswick Maggie, 2003).

But, unfortunately, almost the whole assembly was destroyed in 1860, robbed and demolished in three days by the English-French forces which followed the order of Lord Elgin (fig. 2 and fig. 3). Forests were put on fire, dams were broken. In 1900 Yuanmingyuan was robbed again and artifacts were taken by the most important museums of the world or by private collectors.



Fig. 2. Yuan Ming Yuan – British and French troops
(www.chinatownology.com)



Fig. 3. Yuan Ming Yuan – sometime after its destruction
(www.chinatownology.com)

During the contemporary period the Chinese government funded and made big efforts to restore it (the deviation of one million cm of water to remake Fuhai lake, in 1984, efforts for regaining lost artifacts) (fig. 4 and fig. 5). But, the art of turning the Chinese paintings into a tridimensional landscape, as well as its construction and the old architectural techniques, proportions and topography were lost in time.

Where are the archaeological objects from Yuanmingyuan Park?

The French forces are known to have handed back more than ten thousands Chinese art objects to the Emperor after they had returned to their country.



Fig. 4. Yuan Ming Yuan – the ruins, today
(www.gardenvisit.com)

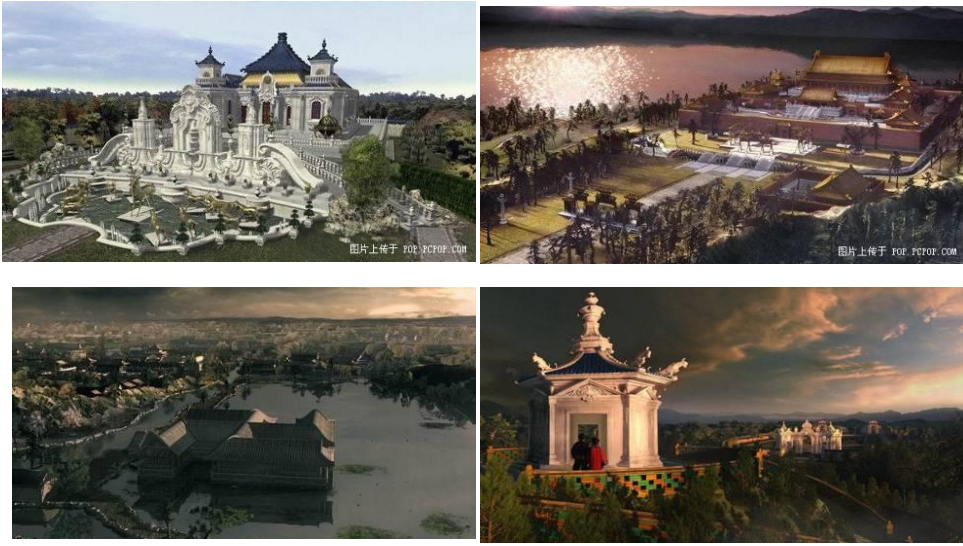


Fig. 5. Restoration collage

(<http://gs.sysu.edu.cn/dkbbs/dispbbs.asp?boardID=4&ID=4101&page=1>)

Thousands of art precious objects are exhibited in Great Britain museums. Among these, archaeological objects dating from Quin (221-206BC) and Han (206BC-220) dynasties, calligraphies and paintings belonging to Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, as well as gold and jade objects from Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

In the French National Library we can find 80 art pieces, including the painting of the Yuanmingyuan Park landscapes, signed by the emperor.

Almost each important museum of the world has objects belonging to Yuan Ming Yuan. This also served as a clock. According to historical data, when the clock indicate the exactly time, one of the 12 statues used to drop water. At 12 o' clock, all statues dropped water simultaneously.



Fig. 6. Three bronze sculptures and a bowl – Christie's auction house (May 2000)

(<http://taipei.tzuchi.org.tw/tzquart/2002sp/qp5.htm>)

This clock was one of the most impressive and valuable constructions in Yuanmingyuan Park, because of the very ingenious design.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional Chinese gardens are representative for the freestyle landscape.

Yuan Ming Yuan garden is one of the few Chinese gardens which bore the influence of the European gardens art, being considered a Renaissance garden with baroque elements.

The garden's decoration began in the XII-th century, during Jin de Est dynasty. The one millennium history of this amazing garden can be better described in two words: "ascent" and "decline".

Between 1860 and 1900 the whole assembly of the Old Imperial Palace Garden was destroyed and robbed, leaving only some architectural relics to be seen nowadays. Wood constructions and the vegetation were entirely destroyed by fire.

The restoration work meant great efforts and difficulties, this leading to the final decision regarding preservation only.

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