
6) The work by Paul Smith is of course directly relevant, but Smith discusses the Sichuan tea industry, while Kreifelts looks at southeast China.


8) This debate forms one of the major themes of Japanese scholarship on China. For a useful introduction to this debate, see Noriko Kamachi, “Feudalism or Absolute Monarchism? Japanese Discourse on the Nature of State and Society in Late Imperial China.” Modern China 16.3 (1990): 330-370. Reinhold seems entirely unaware of the Japanese scholarship on this issue.

9) See, for example, the discussions of the disagreements between Wang Anshi and Sima Guang in the scholarship by Peter K. Bol. “This Culture of Ours:” Intellectual Transitions in Tang and Song China (Stanford University Press: 1992), chapter 7; and “Government, Society, and State: On the Political Visions of Su-ma Kuang and Wang An-shih” in Ordering the World. One wonders why Reinhold does not refer to his work; she only mentions publications by James T.C. Liu and John Meskill carried out in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

10) Bol (1992), 251.

11) Another chapter in this volume, the study of tomb inscriptions by Helga Stahl, which demonstrates with great clarity the historical importance of this type of textual source, has received no attention thus far in this review. This is due in part to the difficulty to link her work to the economic aspects of Song history discussed above, but also because Stahl’s translation of three Northern Song tomb inscriptions was originally presented as a preliminary study for a larger research project, which has since born out the historiographical and genealogical value of these inscriptions.


In his highly stimulating and information-packed book, Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China, Craig Clunas above all wishes to correct the essentialist view (typified by the work of the architect Fletcher Steele) that there is such a thing as “the Chinese garden,” an idealized entity that might serve as a key to Chinese culture. The notion of “the Chinese garden” is, according to Clunas, simplistic, satisfying the Western “orientalist fantasy of the sequestered scholar” (p. 95). Worse, it is ahistorical, for it takes for granted that the aesthetic features we know through such examples of Chinese gardens as those now on view in Suzhou and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have stood unaltered for centuries.

Few if any China specialists today adhere to the sort of essentialism that Clunas attacks, and, as Clunas himself concedes, Steele, whose work was published in 1964 and based on a visit to China in the 1930s, is “an easy, even a trivial target” (p. 11). Yet, by using Steele’s view as a foil for his own discussion, Clunas does drive home a point that perhaps still needs to be made explicit for general readers; his explicitness will, moreover, discourage specialists from backsliding into essentialist talk of Chinese characteristics.

Examining a wide range of texts, Clunas alerts us to the complexity of all that has been included under the rubric “the Chinese garden.” Usually it points to the Chinese term yuan, but what yuan signified and the associations it evoked changed through the ages (p. 30). Often coupled with other words (ponds, forests, pavilions) the term yuan alternatively meant enclosure, orchard, park, estate, and hunting ground. Past Western scholars have flatly trans-
lated these nuanced compounds as “garden,” thus wiping out clues to change. But, Clunas shows, radical changes can be found even in gardens whose names remained fixed for centuries, as in the case of the Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician (p. 30) in Suzhou. Its name stuck for five hundred years while the contents, layout, and contours mutated. What kept the name alive was not the endurance of design or characteristics, but the association of the garden with its original owner.

Clunas marshals compelling evidence to show that, during the course of the sixteenth century, Chinese perceptions and uses of gardens shifted dramatically. Around the beginning of the century, most gardens served as sites for storing wealth, whether in the form of fruit trees, vegetables, silkworm-nurturing mulberry trees, timber, or water for raising fish. To clinch his judgment that early Ming gardens were practical, productive sites, Clunas points out that Ming sumptuary laws, which regulated the consumption and display of all sorts of luxuries, ignored the topic of gardens.

From roughly the 1520s on, Chinese gardens increasingly became places of luxurious enjoyment and excessive consumption (p. 22). Clunas places this shift in the context of a longstanding tension between the value of frugality and penchant for opulence—as typified by the contrast between spartan Hangzhou and extravagant Suzhou (p. 21). In the late Ming, he argues, the balance shifted in favor of the display of affluence and the cultivation of taste. Late-Ming garden owners ceased to consider edible a type of plum (Prunus mume) that had formerly been pickled for food; instead they came to value the tree for its blossoms (pp. 43-44). They recognized that beans and vegetables deserved space but begrudgingly judged these plants to be too inelegant for their courtyards (p. 77). They pushed vegetable plots outside garden walls, while reserving the enclosed space for items that were unproductive: pavilions, towers for taking in scenic views, and “fantastic rocks.” This last item was rarely mentioned in pre-Ming texts and was the very antithesis of productive matter, yet, to obtain these massive, unique status symbols, late-Ming garden owners spent huge sums of money.

With the shift from productivity to luxury, from pickled plums to plum blossoms and beans to rocks, came a preoccupation with taste—with the enjoyment of flowers and choice views (prospects), and with the expression of one’s garden appreciation through poems and painting.

Clunas explores the late-Ming change in garden use in reference to Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), a renowned painter who was a descendant of several generations of an elite Suzhou family and the great grandfather of the author of the “Treatise on Superfluous Things,” which was the subject of one of Clunas’s previous books, Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). Prominent and gifted, members of the Wen lineage left behind paintings, essays, and genealogical records, which Clunas uses to good advantage—to correlate, for example, the writing of poems celebrating gardens with the expansion and contraction of social relationships during the course of a life cycle.

In one chapter, “The Represented Garden,” Clunas takes as his point of departure Foucault’s preoccupation with the “formation of objects which emerge only in discourse” (p. 137, citing The Archaeology of Knowledge), to explore late-Ming conventions of using gardens (in touring and naming sections of gardens, for example) and of representing gardens in paintings and writings. Running throughout this chapter and the book as a whole is Clunas’s preoccupation with the economic, social, and political dimensions of gardens—gardens as property, as a force in social bonding (p. 163), and as something endowed with power derived from the centrality of land in China (p. 207).

Clunas’s book is a wide-ranging essay that opens up numerous issues and invites readers to join the discussion. His methodology and ground rules are, however, confusing. Wishing to bring out the complexity of his subject, Clunas, by his own account, intentionally complicates it (pp. 177, 207) and leaves unresolved numerous inconsistencies (p. 15). He attacks essentialism, but defends his selection of Wen Zhengming as a focus for his study on the grounds that Wen was “the perfect ‘Chinese scholar’” (p. 104). Such inconsistencies, though