

Introduction to Thai Landscape Gardening: Relationship to the Garden Art of China

WANG Jun-li

(Xianyang vocational and technical collage, Xianyang, Shaanxi 71200)

Abstract: Thai garden is full of mystery and romance. Loyal gardens and temple gardens, masterpieces of Thai gardens, are very representational. Chinese influence on Thai gardening is obvious. In this paper, Thai landscape gardening and its history and features are introduced and studied. The conclusion of the indissociable connection between Thai garden and the garden art of China is found. The recommendation is when adopting foreign culture and different ideas of design, a adapting and adopting idea and a wholistic and integrated approach will be all needed.

Keywords: Thai garden, landscape, garden art of China

中图分类号: S731.1

文献标识码: A

文章编号: 94047- (2012) 01-047-04

Thailand is a beautiful country with many wonderful gardens. Gardens in Bangkok might be the most beautiful and representational ones in Thai gardens, with spindly Coconut Palms planted all along the fences, with beautiful orchids and thriving ferns tied to trees with pieces of coconut husks, with clipped shrubs giving a lovely flavor. Interestingly, the mysterious spirit houses and the beautiful temples, things of mystery and romance, might be more beautiful than any other landscape architectures in Thailand. Waters and plants, especially introduced in this article, are important parts of Thai gardens. Chinese culture had profound effects on landscape gardening, as well as social life, in Thailand in the 19th century. Traditional features of Thai gardens, such as clipped trees, decorations, artificial mountains, are of probable inspirations of Chinese garden art. Thai landscape gardening introduced in the article reflects the relationship to the garden art of China.

1 Mystery and Romance of Thai Gardens

M.R. Pimsai Amranand, a Thai famous landscape gardener, once said in 1970 in her original edition of

Gardening in Bangkok, "Except for this feature of dwarf trees trained into special shapes, there is really no such thing as a Thai garden." [1] But a true Thai garden today, in our opinion, is a thing of mystery and romance. "Mysterious" because it poses questions about its inhabitants the pixies suggested by the ornamental statues, and the spirits who occupy the ubiquitous shrine. "Romantic" because it is in the soul of the Thai who create gardens to love nature.

Every Thai temple is an extraordinary garden—a sublimely beautiful mix of ornamental trees and shrubs, and sculpture-like building. Ponds, carved walls and grassy expanses are occasional features: but it is really just the height of the temple architecture artistry and the garden inventiveness that reward the senses. Thai culture has the love of observing, absorbing, adapting and adopting. The culture puts the alliance of religion, nature and art above all else, so it is not surprising that one finds so much inspiration in the thousands of temples of Thailand.

Some temple-garden components were included because of their special significance in Buddhism. Huge Bodhi trees (*Ficus religiosa*), under which the

收稿日期: 2011-12-15

作者简介: 王军利(1967—), 男, 讲师, 现主要从事组织培养及园林绿化等方面的教学及研究工作。受农业部选派, 曾赴泰国农业大学作访问学者一年, 主要研修花卉及庭院设计; 还曾受农业部选拔, 在埃塞俄比亚Mizan Teferi农业大学任教。

Buddha attained enlightenment, can be seen in all temple gardens all over the country. Because local superstitions or some religious reasons prevent people from harming the trees, many of them grow to one hundred feet high or more, with a very wide spread for shade or screening. In addition, ponds or water jars devoted to the sacred Lotus, prized as a symbol of perfection religions. Water lilies, especially the largest water lily *Victoria amazonica*, became the wonder of pond in a garden.

2 Water Bodies and Plants in Thai Gardens Nowadays

Thailand is the land of a million water gardens. Bangkok was once called “the Venice of the East”. In ancient times of town planners gathered waterways into vast tanks which served as reflecting ponds for temple buildings. In the tight courtyards of Thailand’s traditional architecture, bodies of water, either moving canals or lotus ponds, are as integral to the architecture as the fabric of the building themselves.

Aesthetic considerations were secondary in the gardens of most ordinary home. Here the emphasis was on practicality—plants that could be used for food, such as fruit trees, and a vast variety of culinary herbs, and others that yielded the ingredients for traditional medicines. The arrangement, more often than not, was haphazard, with little attention give to present-day concepts of landscape design. Walking the tight lanes of Bangkok, narrow house gates or noodle shop fronts lead into tranquil oasis of verdant foliage, carved colonnades, covered walkways, and pond-side pavilions...

Thailand is a beautiful tropical country with a lot of plant varieties. “Over 70 percent of the total land area is covered with various kinds of tropical forest. In order to protect this biological wealth, successive governments have built up an impressive system of protected area. Since the early 1960s, 91 national parks and 47 wildlife sanctuaries, covering more than 15 percent of the kingdom, have been established.” [2] Numerous smaller conservation sites, such as non-hunting areas, forest parks, reserved forests, botanical gardens, and biosphere reserves, provide additional protection to wild life.

Although plant varieties were abundant, not all plants could be planted in gardens. Superstition or symbolism played (and to some extent continues to play)

a significant role. At Royal Palace, the choice and exact sitting of plants was determined by a complex pattern based on their local names, which in turn suggested such concepts as “hopeful”, “youth”, and “Mutual understanding”. A Star Gooseberry (*phyllanthus acidus*; in Thai *ma-yom*) is regarded as lucky when planted at the front of a house since its Thai name sounds like the word for “popularity”. Almost any plant whose Thai name begins with the syllable *ma* is, in fact, considered auspicious. On the other hand, the plants whose name sounds like the word for “unpopularity” were considered to be unlucky.

3 Chinese Influence in Thai Landscape Gardening in the 19th Century

What is a truly Thai garden? A history professor at Chulalongkorn University once told that an example of a Thai garden was the one in the middle courtyard of the Grand Palace. It is in front of the Chakri Hall, and this garden consists of a lawn on the edges of which grow a few very gnarled old trees clipped and trained into grotesque shape. If this is a Thai garden, does it perhaps express one aspect of the Thai character, the love of neatness, the need to keep strict control over oneself and one’s feelings, an expression of feelings well-restrained? Or is it just an idea from the Chinese?

A Chinese garden was planned as a series of pictures, like pictures on a scroll. Chinese garden art became a complete art form in the Sung period (A.D. 960–1280) when Chinese landscape painting was at its best[3]. In all landscapes the Chinese saw the Taoist principle of Yin and Yang—the unity of opposites. And so they put a gnarled old pine tree next to an erect young banana, symbolizing old age and youth; or they had rocky mountains and water together symbolizing permanence and impermanence[4]. Apart from the Chinese influence exerted over us in the early nineteenth century, the Thai people could easily have brought these ideas with them when they left China and settled in Siam in the Thirteenth century, driven out by Kublai Khan, who was incidentally a very keen gardener.

Kublai Khan’s own parks and gardens were lovely. Marco Polo described one particular garden in which Kublai Khan made an artificial hill and planted all over it enormous evergreen trees which he had brought, fully-grown, from the forest. And among the trees at the top, he built a green palace. At the bottom

of the hill was a large lake made by removing the earth for the hill. The lake was stocked with various fish so that the Khan could choose what he wanted for dinner. Then on the advice of his astrologers who told him that ‘those who plant trees are rewarded with long life,’ he planted trees along all the roads all over his kingdom.

Palace gardens seem to have drawn most of the visual inspiration from Chinese models [5]. The closest modern equivalent, in Bangkok’s Grand Palace compound, has been re-landscaped countless times since its inception, and perhaps the only contemporary features that would be recognizable to the original builders are the trees trained and clipped into odd shapes, a distinctly Chinese horticultural passion.

Although the clipped trees are what most Thais turn to when they want to add a touch of “traditional” to contemporary gardens. M.R.Pimsai disagreed with them[1]. She showed her opinion and evidence as follow: But we must go back to the clipped trees in the Grand Palace. The idea of these trees was clearly derived from the gnarled old pin trees of the Chinese, but the symbolism of the original idea must have been lost because they look anything but natural. However, there are, in the gardens of many old Siamese families, miniature gardens made in dishes, pots, and trays placed rather formally around a lawn or a courtyard and these contain the elements of a Chinese garden rocks, trees, and water, all irregularly shaped, nothing symmetrical, to represent a landscape.

Prince Damrong Diskul[1] said in his books that there had been interest in the clipped and knotted trees since Sukhothai days when the influence was clearly Chinese, and later in Ayutthaya days when the Siamese tried to imitate Japanese bonsais. But whereas the Japanese tried to imitate Nature, the Siamese tried to make their trees into odd, fantastic shapes. They had names for each style in which a tree could be trained. Sometimes they used the roots because these looked more grotesque.

A modern development in 1960s has been to use wires to train plants and clip them into the shapes of birds and animals, a little like European topiary... You can get a peacock, a rabbit, an elephant, and various other shapes including a demon from Ramayana.

Another traditional feature—also of probable Chinese inspiration—that can still be seen in some gardens is the artificial mountain made of pebbles or larger stones cemented together to form a whole, often

with waterfalls and pools as well as adorned with clipped trees on ordinary plants[6]. These may be miniature versions in shallow pots or sizeable creations incorporated into the garden design; a large one in the inner part of the Grand Palace was the site of several important ceremonies such as the cutting of the top-knot when children reached puberty.

Traditional Chinese landscape designers talk about the importance of balancing of the shan (mountain) and shui (water). In Chinese classical gardens, the ornamental rotunda with its delicate tracery and picturesquely sprung roof, has always had place of honor at the water’s edge[7]. A Balinese landscape designer, Made Wijaya[8], also described the Chinese influence on the Southeast Asia in his book in 1999: Chinese culture had a great influence on the courts of tropical Southeast Asia, thus many floating pavilions, box-like courtyards and popular ‘Chinese Mountains’ were found in the great works of landscape art across equatorial Asia.

As in China, Thai palaces consisted of various enclosed sections, each serving a particular function. The outer areas were relatively bare of greenery, often paved with cobblestones and devoted to government offices and audience halls; the real gardens lay behind high walls, designed for the private pleasure.

Prince Chula Chakrabongse notes in his history of Chakri Dynasty that, in the early 19th century, King Rama II redesigned the original garden that had been planted by his father. He created one with “a large lake, lined with bricks, which had several islands, large and small, all connected together by charming little bridges of diverse designs. On some of the islands there were Chinese pagodas, on others little European pavilions, and the King took his meals or listened to music in these delightful buildings. There was boating on the lake, and sometimes evening parties were held when the Court went into fancy dress, and all the little canoes which were paddled around the islands had bright lamps of myriad hues.” The description is strikingly similar to many written about the Imperial Palace in Beijing[4].

Under the Bangkok dynasty’s second King, the Siwalai Garden was dominated by a large lake containing several islands; on these there were Chinese-style pavilions... The third King, a pious Buddhist, disapproved of such frivolity and dismantled most of the garden, though retaining some of the

Chinese statuary[9]. These Chinese statuary or figures became a popular feature of Thai Palace and temple gardens in the early century, when quantities of them came to Thailand as ballast on ships returning from the rice trade, and can be seen in many Thai gardens at present time. Chinese influence, strong during much of the 19th century, is evident in stone figures used as decorations and in two moon gates leading through one wall into the former women's quarter. Conclusion

Implicit in Thai landscape design is a wisdom adopting the ideas of Chinese garden art. Instead of destroying the landscape influenced by Chinese culture, or adopting Chinese culture completely without any choice, Thai landscape action is informed by a design philosophy that is devoted to creating harmony in Chinese influence, west culture and Thai culture. There is an integration of nature and Thai culture, as well as a strong culture understanding of its importance. The spirits of Chinese garden art are infused to Thai landscape gardening, but none of them has covered the brilliance of Thai culture. On the contrary, Chinese culture, west culture and Thai culture are made harmonious by adherence of the tenets of Thai philosophy. Thai culture, associated with Chinese culture, beautified the golden-axe-shaped land.

There is much that Chinese architects and landscape designers can learn from examining processes that Thai landscape adopting thoughts of Chinese garden art at the same time. The most fundamental conclusion may be that, if any significant improvement in the quality of Chinese design is to be achieved, a wholistic and integrated approach, like that found in Thailand, will be needed. It is possible to achieve wholeness in design in our time. Designers can continue to act expediently—blaming budgets, clients, or the zeitgeist for the poor quality and maladaptiveness of

their work—or they can take responsibility for infusing their work with more harmony and richness when facing adopting foreign culture and different ideas of design. It is a choice that faces us now—do we create a new wholeness, or do we accept continued fragmentation?

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to Asst. Professor Thunya Taychasinpitak, for his kind help we could have visited many Thai gardens in the period of studying in Thailand. Our deep gratitude goes also to Dr. Chitapa Ketavan for supplying us a lot of data about Thai landscape gardening. This project was supported by Tingthanathikul Foundation of Thailand.

Literature Cite

- [1] Pimsai Amranand, William Warren, Ping Amranand. Gardening in Bangkok, Bangkok: The Siam Society. 1996.
- [2] Stephen Elliott, Gerald Cubitt. The National Parks and other wild places of Thailand, Bangkok: AsiaBooks. 2001.
- [3] 周维权. 中国古典园林史(第二版) [M], 1999.
- [4] C. Thomas Mitchel, Jiangmei Wu. Living Design: The Daoist Way of Building. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1998.
- [5] Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, William Warren. Thai garden Style, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing. 1998.
- [6] 韩波, 楚小庆. 论中国古典园林设计中的曲线意识及其形成[J]. 金陵科技学院学报, 2004. 20(1): 74-82.
- [7] 孟兆祯. 园林设计之于城市景观. 中国园林, 2002(4): 13-16.
- [8] Made Wijaya. Tropical garden design [M]. 1999.
- [9] William Warren. The tropical garden: the gardens in Thailand, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. London: Amazon. 1997.

[责任编辑、校对: 牛国阳]

泰国园林及其与中国园林的关系

王军利

(咸阳职业技术学院, 陕西 咸阳 712000)

摘 要: 泰国园林充满着神秘和浪漫, 皇家园林和寺庙园林是泰国园林的精品, 极具有代表性。中国文化对泰国造园影响深远。本文对泰国造园艺术及其历史、特征作了介绍和研究。指出了泰国园林与中国园林艺术不可分割的内在联系, 同时也指出, 在吸收外来文化和不同设计理念时, 既要有适应和吸收的观念, 又要有全局和整体的方法。

关键词: 泰国园林; 园林; 中国园林艺术