

Ethnographic Study on Parkification of Suzhou Traditional Gardens

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Abstract. Suzhou traditional gardens are valuable cultural heritages. They were not designed for the public initially, but in recent years, they experienced an unavoidable transformation from private property to public estate. In order to graphically describe such a process and thus explore related causes and consequences, the phenomenon is conclusively defined as parkification, taking the public park as a metaphor. Data is collected using ethnographic methods, including observational studies, field notes, photographic records, and archival research. Investigation has proved that parkificated Suzhou traditional gardens have been assimilating into the urban environment, but more effort needs to be put into maintenance and management. According to current trends in the industry, suggestions are provided respectively for designers, artisans, and citizens. A proposal is also made to parkificate private gardens into public spaces in situations when individual owners become unable to afford necessary maintenance.

Keywords: Landscape Architecture; Chinese Classical Gardens; Suzhou Traditional Gardens; Ethnography.

1. Introduction

No specific term in English could be found to represent Suzhou Traditional Gardens. Because of their landscaping and architectural elements, the word is often directly translated into gardens or parks. However, the accurate definition of garden is a piece of land next to or around your house where you can grow flowers, fruit, vegetables, usually with a lawn [1]. Simultaneously, park is defined as "an area of public land in a town or a city where people go to work, play, and relax" [1]. They do not fit the characteristics of Suzhou gardens (stand for both Suzhou traditional Gardens in the past and their modern derivatives at present in this article). In order to conclude an appropriate definition, more attention must be paid to the history.

The number of Suzhou traditional gardens peaked around 1450, in Ming dynasty. This was the most significant period for its development. Suzhou was the informal but indisputable cultural capital of the Ming Dynasty [2]. The total number of gardens built in this generation broke the historic record, with relevant technology, theories and aesthetics astonishingly evolved. The mature appearance of Suzhou traditional gardens was eventually established [3].

However, if Suzhou traditional gardens are defined as public green spaces for sightseeing, the abnormal prosperity of garden creations during wars in the late Yuan Dynasty would not make sense. To explain this phenomenon, the phenomenon called literati in the wilderness should be introduced. Jiangnan (refers to areas south of the Yangtze River, including Suzhou) literati used to flee into uninhabited mountains to avoid wars. With abundant natural resources they became the main contributors to the development of Suzhou Traditional Gardens. Such art form eventually matured and flourished in the shadow, and abstracted into literati's mental world over time.

Taoism also flourished in Yuan Dynasty. The main spirit can be told from the annotation wrote by Xiang Guo in Village: "When you are satisfied with your ego, you would be able to obtain mental freedom by ignoring the secular reference frame. The big and the small no longer differs [4]." Reflecting in the Jiangnan literati and their gardens, this sentence can be understood as: Although the landscapes built artificially in the gardens can definitely not replace the real nature, as long as a person remains excluded from the regular reference frame, the disparity will be eliminated. In other words,

Jiangnan literati mentally lived in the unlimited natural world while physically existing in seclusion in the gardens they built.

With stronger cultural and philosophical characteristics, Suzhou traditional gardens manifest a unique feature of privacy, or seclusion, as they were not made for the public. Therefore, the definition of Suzhou Gardens should be distinguished from parks: a private space designed to reflect the owner's spiritual appearance through nature-simulating techniques. This brings us to the question: How do these monopolized, culturally-meaningful artworks, suddenly "parkificate" into public green spaces for citizens and tourists nowadays?

2. Parkification of Suzhou gardens

2.1 Parkification of Suzhou gardens: The cause

The root cause should be the notable shift of ownership of Suzhou gardens from local famous families and celebrities to the government. A typical example is the Lion Grove (Shizilin), which used to belong to the Pei family until China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During the crucial revolution, the Pei family and many other famous local families were harshly suppressed. The government confiscated their estates and properties, including the Lion Grove, where the well-known architect, I. M. Pei, spent his childhood in. The event is now publicly acknowledged by the Chinese government as a grave historical mistake. Decades later, in 2002, the Suzhou government requested I.M. Pei, as the only remained branch of the Pei family, to design the Suzhou Museum, which is only 3-minute walk away from the Lion Grove. Although this offer can be viewed as late compensation, Pei's childhood residence has already become a world cultural heritage and "parkificated" into a scenic square. Becoming a cultural heritage means openness, which contradicts the former designer's original intention.

From a positive perspective, this might have also provided a potential solution to the issue of how parkificated Suzhou gardens could be integrated into urban environments. In former times, when the Pei family were prosperous, they had the ability to protect and maintain such enormous work of art. A large proportion of the rockeries in the Lion Grove were finely carved to create quaint crescent hollows. Considering the number of rockeries in this garden, the requirement of finance and labor simply during construction would be outrageous. In addition, as the maintainer of the Lion Grove, the family would also need:

Aesthetic appreciation required for pruning trees.

Deep understanding of the habits of various vegetation.

Knowledge of feeding and medication of koi in the ponds.

Familiarity with architectural structures such as pavilions, pagodas, and terraces, as well as relevant repairing techniques.

In terms of politics, China's working-class subjected social structure has led to the unavoidable elimination of the landed gentry class, owners of Suzhou gardens in the former feudal period. As a result, the possibility that the Pei family could run the daily maintenance at present is undoubtedly negligible, not to mention that artisans with comprehensive relevant knowledge and skills are rarely seen nowadays. Under this trend, although parkification would damage aesthetic and philosophical values to some extent, being used by the public is not the worst way out for Suzhou gardens.

2.2 Parkification of Suzhou gardens: Ethnographic evidences

Through investigations in several protected Suzhou gardens, a number of park features shown by these parkificated cultural artifacts could be concluded. Firstly, Suzhou Gardens used not to mark the streamlines. Designers pay much attention to create the feeling of exploration, hence would not annotate specific routes using stone slabs or gabion like Japanese gardens do. Even if the stone bricks are paved, they would be paved all over the place with no clear roads showing most of the time. However, when Suzhou gardens become cultural spaces accessible for the public, it is necessary to mark the routes in order to guide and distribute the massive number of visitors. Maps, as shown in

frequently in the corridors than in other parts of the garden. This leads to lack of actual participation in these former cultural spaces. Visitors could view almost any scene from any corner of the garden when standing in the corridors as in Figure 3. There, painters set their easels; photographers find suitable camera angles; writers form their theories about the garden by connecting what they see with pre-founded knowledge. Visitors seem to spontaneously concentrate in corridors as in Figure 4. Vegetation, waters, and rockeries are dimensionally degraded into flat images sticking around the corridor. In this situation, visiting a Suzhou Garden would not worth more than sitting in a park and sharing scenic photos with others.



Figure 3. A framed view of the Lingering Garden



Figure 4. Visitors in the Lingering Garden

Thirdly and unexpectedly, parkification of Suzhou gardens shows an ambiguous duality. While transforming into a park for tourists- mostly hasty sightseers- Suzhou gardens also play a principal role for the locals. Apart from tourists that would not possibly visit the same garden twice, Suzhou citizens treat these cultural heritages as public squares. The importance of participation is not left in the ancient dynasties. An increasing number of elders are seen square-dancing in the waterside pavilions used for opera performances; toddlers learning to walk and staggering to parents with hands holding tightly to the handrails alongside a terrace; couples sitting next to ponds and feeding the koi. With reduced privacy, as mentioned forewords, Suzhou gardens shift from a unidirectional approach to mental emancipation to an interactive stage for urban life to perform. Hasty sightseers and slow ethnographers are assembled at the same time. The place's genius loci [8] gathers both typologies to visualize and symbolize both forms of life as a totality: a contemporary, concretized public park for all.

2.3 Parkification of Suzhou gardens: Adaptation

Tourists' and citizens' participation make Suzhou gardens become parks: from private works of art to public entertainment spaces. However, it would be unfairly unilateral to conclude that parkification damages the aesthetic and cultural values in the process of parkification. Suzhou gardens

are the legacy of classical Chinese aesthetics instead of an ancient immutable design formula. Designing a Suzhou Garden has no law to follow, only lessons and experiences summarized by former designers to learn from. There is no fixed form of design techniques to create a Suzhou Garden. All is about adapting to existing elements: local climate conditions, materials availability, and the times. Alternatively, if designers from Suzhou have the opportunity to learn about vegetation characteristics, local climate and lifestyle, and architectural features in areas other than Suzhou, they could still make fabulous gardens using local resources. Gardens built overseas, such as Botanical Gardens in Staten Island, are the compelling evidence. Assuming contemporary materials, such as glass and concrete, were brought back to ancient times, the innovative creators would definitely manage to utilize them. Increased complexity in the fabrics would only bring more valid expressions of various landscape textures, Figures, light, and shadow qualities. Since the 6th century B.C., Suzhou gardens are continuously developing through time. Hence, there is no reason to affirm the diminution of their cultural and aesthetic values when adaptation is made to the modern urban environment. After all, what defines the gardens is the ever-changing context of people engaged in and the decade they are experiencing through.

3. Present problems and phenomena of parkificated Suzhou gardens

The original intention to design a Suzhou Garden does not match its current position as a public park. In more detail, compulsory openness has already raised many problems, mainly regarding protection and maintenance work. During investigations to 4 famous Suzhou gardens, namely the Lion Grove (Shizilin), Lingering Garden (Liuyuan), Huanxiu Villa (Huanxiushanzhuang or Mountain Villa), and the Couple's Garden (Ou'yuan), some problems and phenomena were discovered.

3.1 The Lion Grove (Shizilin)

The Lion Grove attracts extraordinary visitors for its rockeries with multiple spatial levels and abundant caves. Before opening to the public, a Suzhou Garden usually serves a prosperous local family and their guests, in this case, the Pei family. Rockery scenes, paths, and hallways were not made for the crowds on holidays in modern times. Oppositely, crowds are moving disasters for them.

Visitors are allowed to touch and step on rockeries because the path is there: the complicated artificial cave and valley system. However, excessive touch with hand by people has accelerated the formation of the oxide layer on rockery surfaces (Figure 5). Aesthetically speaking, it enhances the values of these rockeries. Technically speaking, it makes them unexpectedly slippery and dangerous, especially for the elders and children. Anti-slip tape is the latest solution, which can be seen on almost every foot-hold surface of the rockeries (Figure 6). Via investigation, the quality of the tape could be acknowledged reliable in terms of safety protection. Hence the problem is primarily about aesthetic values: Excessive functional anthropogenic mark, including the remarkable tape and scribbling on the wall in the camera's dead angle (Figure 7), is not ideal for either a cultural heritage or a public park.



Figure 5. Oxide layer on surface of rockery



Figure 6. Anti-slip tape on rockeries



Figure 7. Scribbling on the wall in the Lion Grove

3.2 The Huanxiu Villa (Huanxiushanzhuang)

For the Lion Grove mentioned above, the primary problem is the acceleration of the formation of slippery oxide layers on rockery surfaces due to human activities. When it comes to Huanxiu Villa, even Ge Yuliang (designer of Huanxiu Villa, 1764-1830) would not have foreseen the eventual issue, rockery submergence. The responsive factor is exactly Ge's unique rockery technique that emphasizes the depth of mountains [9]. The medium layer, apart from the top and bottom layers of rockery mountains, is the main body of the entity. The aesthetics and stability of rockeries are both tightly associated with it [10]. In Huanxiu Villa, the medium layer contains Taihu-stone structures of interlocking vaults in various shapes and sizes to miniaturize mountains in reality. Such technique, as declared by Ge, is similar to the method of building a firm ring bridge; hence, its physical strength should allow thousands of years' steadiness [11]. The fact has proved him wrong. To illustrate a deep mountain [9], he used an astonishing but excessive amount of Taihu stones in limited space. As Ji Cheng described in *Yuanye*, the rockeries in Huanxiu Villa have a close affinity to karst landforms [10]. Except for structural similarity, the stones Ge used for rockeries in the medium layer are Taihu stones, which have the same main chemical composition as limestone in karst landforms, Sodium Carbonate. A further analogy can then be made: They would both be prone to collapsing. The macro landform changes for limestone, from a cockpit to cone karst and eventually tower karst before collapsing, would be slow due to its scale. While for the rockery mountain made of stacks of Taihu stones, it would be sooner, which was 300 years in this case. The two rapidly-growing *Celtis Sinensis* (Figure 8) planted on the mountain also accelerates the submergence via biological weathering [12].



Figure 8. Celtis sinensis planted on the rockery mountain in Huanxiu Villa

As a result, the time-consuming repairing and monitoring work started from around 2005 [12]. This leads to a minor consequence: parts in repair forbids visitors from entrance (Figure 9) because monitoring points (Figure 10) were set up in the rockery mountain. Some communication issues between the repair-responsive department and tourism administration can also be interpreted. On the official website of Huanxiu Villa, there is no announcement about the prohibition from entering the rockery mountains, not to mention that ticket price increased from ¥1 in 2016 to ¥15 in 2022 with rockeries continuously in repair. Therefore, although the repair work is carried on smoothly with acknowledged progress, Huanxiu Villa normally receives the least visitors and the most negative comments.



Figure 9. Forbidden zone in Huanxiu Villa

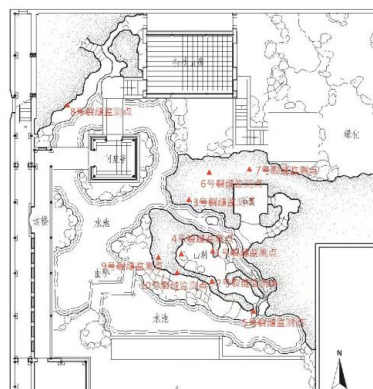


Figure 10. Distribution map of monitoring points in Huanxiu Villa [12]

Original designers could not thoroughly consider their artworks' prospects hundreds of years later. This is one of the reasons why relative personnel is still needed nowadays. More than the classic

knowledge and techniques are required to repair these cultural heritages eroded by times, and to successfully transform them into parks which captures the lasting of human civilization.

3.3 The Lingering Garden-Liuyuan

The Lingering Garden deserves its name for attracting an extreme number of visitors as shown in Figure 11 (a), with an artful arrangement of architectural elements, including pavilions, terraces, open halls, and four completely disparate scenic typologies. The implementation of advanced modern facilities proves a close relationship between tourism income and the level of investment. One example of the facilities is the auto-spraying system in the bonsai garden's northern part of the Lingering Garden can be seen in Figure 11 (b). Its convenience and high efficiency are self-evident: To keep humidity high in the air, especially during summer, spraying is the cheapest method regarding labor cost and water rent.



Figure 11. (a) Visitors in the Lingering Garden (left), (b) the auto-spraying system in Lingering Garden (right)

Before the pandemic, a study on tourism value and environmental protection of Suzhou gardens once pointed out that water qualities in most gardens could only reach an acceptable standard [13]. However, during recent investigation to the Lingering Garden, water restoration is well-conducted. This is the only garden where a worker dragging floating leaves out from the ponds (Figure 12) was seen. Volunteers in green uniforms were also busy reminding visitors not to litter or smoke in the garden (Figure 12). Furthermore, repair work on rockeries in the Lingering Garden is relatively more satisfactory compared to the Huanxiu Villa. On the western part of the garden, there lies a rockery valley (Figure 13,). The path settles in-between a sinuous valley which simulates a river course, with angles and gradients firmly natural: In literati's words, it is full of sentiments from the wilderness. Repair work has been done in recent years according to the intersections of old and new stones, probably during the 1960s reconstruction. The work was done properly to rebuild parts damaged by over-growing arbor roots, with negligible disruption towards tourism since the route remains unchanged. All mentioned above show an effort to preserve the original appearance of the garden using an innovative, successful modern approach.



Figure 12. A worker dragging leaves from ponds (left) and a volunteer (right) in the Lingering Garden



Figure 13. The rockery valley (left) and its mapped plan (1953) in the Lingering Garden (right) [14]

3.4 The Couple’s Garden (Ou’yuan)

There is no evidence of technical issue as in the Lion Grove or large-scale repair work as in the Huanxiu Villa in the Couple’s Garden (Ou’yuan). Protection measures include safety signs and installation of guardrails along the bridges (Figure 14.), and restricted entrance to a proportion of the garden (Figure 15.). The number of visitors is within a suitable range, with the publicly accepted ticket price and proper management. In addition, the Couple’s Garden has also developed a business in the wedding photography industry. This is due to the meaning of its name from former owners, Shen Bingcheng (1823-1895) and Yan Yonghua (1836-1891), a well-known devoted couple in history. In general, effective assimilation progress and unique way of surviving in modern society was witnessed in the Couple’s Garden.



Figure 14. Caution sign near the rockery in the Couple’s Garden (left) and Caution sign near the pond and guardrails along the bridge in the Couple’s Garden (right)

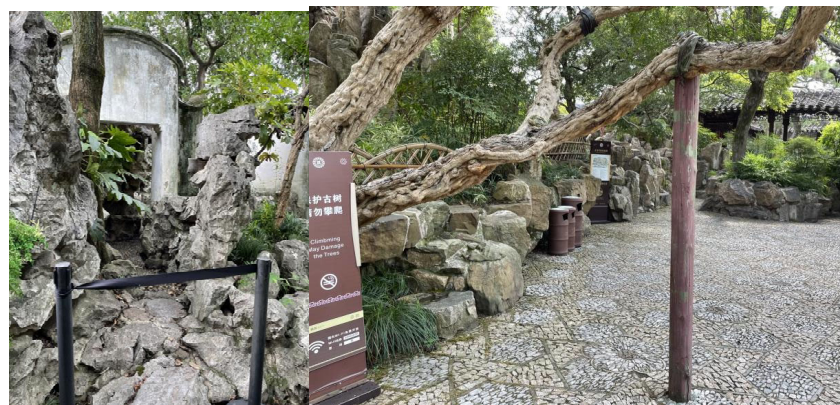


Figure 15. Forbidden zone in the Couple’s Garden (left) and Caution sign in front of an old pomegranate in the Couple’s Garden (right)

4. Trends and suggestions

4.1 Designers

Except for cultural heritages requiring protection, the characteristic elements and techniques used in Suzhou traditional gardens have also provided reference to nowadays design industry, such as landscape design and urban planning. The number and quality of designers gradually rise due to increasingly mature technology and deeper understandings. In recent years, designers are becoming more inclined to accept private clients and avoid working for governmental programs. This is mainly because of miscellaneous restrictions during the design procedure associated with local authorities, for example, consideration of parking spaces. Under similar situations of sites and payments, designing for the public authorities means more time to be spent on official procedures and possible embezzlement during the progress. As a result, many designers' creativity and efficiency are reduced if they are unfamiliar with public relations. The suggestion is to evaluate the site and the client before accepting a commission and look for commissions that allow maximum creativity and innovation.

4.2 Artisans

Artisans are those who master skills such as piling rockery, paving stones, and maintaining flowers and trees in Suzhou Gardens. They are a group of people that are always ignored. In other words, the number of artisans for Suzhou Gardens is decreasing primarily because basic gardening techniques are constantly neglected in front of aesthetic values. Without them, a designer would become a lonely conductor in orchestra performance. They are required whether the garden is designed for the public or individuals. Systematic training programs are required to generate such technical professionals. Encouragement policies, including propaganda and subsidies, could be taken as potential solutions.

4.3 Citizens

Some uncivilized actions by low-quality visitors, such as scribbling on the walls in the Lion Grove, have already been mentioned. Other actions including smoking, littering, feeding koi with improper food, entering repairing zones, breaking off branches from trees, and climbing unstable rockeries, are also frequent. These are common especially during holidays when visitor numbers peak. Therefore, visitors with higher quality are urgently required. They are the vital energy source to infuse these ancient cultural spaces with vitality and modern spirits. This is why education and laws are important: to respect the native architecture and landscape of Suzhou gardens while using it as a park.

5. Conclusions

Considering the present state of parkificated Suzhou traditional gardens and the tendency of designers to accept individual clients, a proposal could therefore be made. In the case that a designer accepts a private commission, when the private can no longer maintain the garden for all reasons over time, authorities shall parkificate it reasonably as a means to inherit a piece of a master artwork. Due to the involvement of private and public rights transformation, the handover should be initiated by the private owner, and authorities should not confiscate any private property. An institution should also be established to deal with related affairs: evaluating gardens on the parkification waitlist, providing targeted repairing and maintaining methods, and preparing development plans for parkificated gardens. Investment should focus on training relevant personnel (designers and artisans) and giving them preferential treatment.

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