

Classic Gardens of Suzhou

Suzhou—an ancient city located on the south of the Yangtze River—is home to some wonderful classical-style gardens in China. Learn about the most important of these and what makes them great examples of Chinese culture, as well as the idea of creating a natural world within the garden walls to showcase nature's beauty.

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For Review Only

Before You Read

This story is about the gardens in the city of Suzhou, in Jiangsu Province,¹ south of the Yangtze River, and about 100 kilometers west of Shanghai.



A. City of Gardens. Read the paragraph. Then match each word with the correct definition.

In the 12th century, the Southern Song **Dynasty**² (1127–1279) moved its capital to Lin'an (modern-day Hangzhou). Near Lin'an, on the banks of Lake Tai and located along the Grand Canal is the city of Suzhou, a delightful city so full of lakes, ponds, springs, canals, and rivers that it is often called the Venice of the East. Given its location near the capital and its natural beauty, Suzhou became a place where **scholars**³ preferred to live, and it stayed that way for many centuries. There were over 300 gardens built in or near Suzhou—mostly by retired scholars—inside walled family estates. The gardens try to create natural landscapes on a small scale. More than 60 of these are still in existence, and nine of these treasures have been named World Heritage Sites by UNESCO because they are considered prized examples of classical Chinese garden design.

- | | | |
|---------------|-----|--|
| 1. delightful | ___ | a. a body of still water smaller than a lake |
| 2. estate | ___ | b. very enjoyable |
| 3. existence | ___ | c. the presence of something in the real world |
| 4. pond | ___ | d. a large house with much land |
| 5. treasure | ___ | e. valuable things |

¹**province:** one of the districts that some countries are divided into with its own local government

²**dynasty:** a period of time when members of the same family rule a country

³**scholar:** a person of great learning

B. Chinese Classical Gardens. Read the blog post and look at the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

A screenshot of a web browser showing a blog post. The browser's address bar is empty, and the navigation menu includes 'Home', 'Links', 'Blogs', and 'Videos'. The blog post text discusses the author's interest in Chinese gardens and describes three types: imperial, temple, and southern gardens. A photo of a garden with a pond and pavilion is visible on the right side of the browser window.

Home Links **Blogs** Videos

I have become really interested in Chinese gardens, and so I've decided to do some research on them before my trip to China next week. It seems that there are three main types of classical Chinese gardens. The first type is the **imperial**⁴ garden, the best example of which is the Summer Palace. Imperial gardens were the gardens for **emperors**.⁵ They were usually quite large, and many of them looked like scenes from beautiful paintings, with magnificent living quarters, halls, brightly colored **pavilions**,⁶ huge lakes, covered passages, and forests. Since these gardens were for the emperor, no expense was spared, and everything in the garden was the best of the best.

Next are temple gardens. These have some of the same features as the imperial gardens. Since these were part of the temple, the gardens were meant to be places where people could pray and find peace, thus they were open to the public. Many of these temple gardens were in spectacular natural settings with mountains serving as a background.

Finally, there are the southern gardens. It is said that the gardens south of the Yangtze are the best of China, and those in Suzhou are the best south of the Yangtze River. Many of these gardens were created by scholars and officials. These gardens were once private, but now are open to all. They were a lot like temple gardens, but smaller and more delicate, and instead of temples there were houses where the scholars and their families lived, along with pavilions, rooms for viewing the garden and ponds, and studios for writing poetry and painting.

I hope to see examples of each of these kinds of garden when I visit China. I have already planned visits to Suzhou and Beijing, and I will post pictures so that everyone can enjoy my trip.

A photograph of a classical Chinese garden. It features a small pond with a pavilion, surrounded by trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange and red. The garden is enclosed by a traditional wooden fence.

1. In your opinion, why do many people like classical Chinese gardens?
2. What do you think about classical Chinese gardens?
3. How might a classical Chinese garden differ from a western flower garden?

⁴**imperial:** of an emperor or an empire

⁵**emperor:** the ruler of a group of countries or a large country

⁶**pavilion:** an open building in a garden or park

You enter through a round entrance known as a moon gate. There, before you, is a covered passage made of red wood. This passage leads you past a walled courtyard of gray bricks. Along the edges of the courtyard are strangely shaped rocks, among which grow banana plants (*bajiao*) and **bamboo**,⁷ breaking up the white uniformity of the walls. The whole scene is like a painted **scroll**,⁸ with every step you take, another part of the scroll is unrolled. More things catch your eye, for example, in the far corner of the courtyard is a pond. Opposite to you, midway along the wall, is a small Chinese pavilion harboring an odd rock. And to your left are rocks arranged to represent the Chinese character for mountain—山 (*shan*).

As you step into the courtyard, you look over the scene. Latticed **windows**⁹ in the walls reveal yet more bamboo, suggesting that the courtyard is just one part of a much larger garden. At the far end of the courtyard is a room with wooden chairs, and windows that create frames for the scene of rocks and bamboo beyond them, reminding you ever so much of Chinese ink-wash paintings. This little courtyard is a picture of the classic Chinese concept of peace and beauty. Here, you are transported to the world of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and you can imagine people wearing traditional Chinese clothes sitting and drinking tea, rising to greet you with a bow. Yet, you are not in China. You are in a copy of a Chinese garden at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The Astor Chinese Garden Court was created in 1981 with the help of artists and materials from China, and it represented the first permanent cultural exchange between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. The courtyard is a place of quiet rest for museum visitors, and it sets the scene for the museum's excellent collection of Ming Dynasty art. As a museum piece in and of itself, the garden gives a wonderful view of ancient China.



⁷**bamboo**: a tall plant of the grass family used for construction and furniture

⁸**scroll**: paper for writing or painting on which is rolled up

⁹**latticed window**: a window with strips of wood crossed over it



View of a Garden Villa

Perhaps the most famous style of Chinese garden is that of the scholar-official. According to Confucius, the government should be run by men of **virtue**,¹⁰ and virtue could be achieved in part through learning. For this reason, in ancient China most government officials were scholars of classical Chinese literature. Part of their dream was to live a life of quiet thought, where they could enjoy tea, poetry, traditional arts, and nature. As a result, behind the walls of their personal estates, they built delightful gardens, filled with trees, flowers, ponds, and rocks, all arranged to suggest beautiful landscapes from nature or to show an idea of a perfect world. These gardens were often built in the city, so that the owner could enjoy the benefits of urban life while living in a quiet natural environment. While these gardens were private, they were used to entertain friends, for poetry reading, and for parties.

The Astor Chinese Garden Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a copy of the courtyard from one of these gardens—the Master of Nets Garden (Wangshi Yuan). This garden was first built in 1174 by Shi Zhengzhi, a government official who found inspiration from the free and simple life of fishermen. The most well-known feature of his garden was his library, which was said to have contained more than 10,000 volumes. The garden gradually fell into ruin and was rebuilt several times in its existence, most importantly by Song Zongyuan, a Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) official who bought the property around 1765 as a place to retire and to take care of his mother. He began to call himself the “Master of the Nets,” and kept the fisherman theme for the garden. The Master of Nets Garden covers about half a **hectare**,¹¹ and has three sections—houses, a main garden, and an inner garden. The smaller inner garden includes the

Dian Chun Yi, or the Late Spring Studio, which is the courtyard that the Astor Chinese Garden Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is based on.

As the Dian Chun Yi is a good example of some important ideas behind Suzhou garden design, it bears closer examination. Everything in the garden was carefully planned and thought out before the garden was built. For example, the covered passage is not straight, but has a bend in it, as it is meant to represent a natural path rather than a hallway in a building. The entrance to the garden and passage were also designed so that visitors can best see the scenes that the garden’s designer wanted to show them. Anybody who walks along the passage will find their eyes naturally focus on different parts of the garden, and so, in a sense, new scenes are revealed. The step down from the passage into the courtyard is made of rough rock, as if to say that by entering the courtyard you have entered this natural world that the designer has created.

The focus of the inner garden is not the plants, but large rocks. These were chosen and arranged to suggest natural scenes and to inspire poetic imagination. In the Dian Chun Yi and most other gardens in Suzhou, the rocks are *taihu* stone—a kind of soft stone found near Taihu Lake which looks **weathered**¹² and is filled with holes. In the same way many people today look up at the clouds and imagine different shapes and images, the weathered stones with many holes add to the interest and mystery of the gardens. It was expected that people going there would look at the rocks and let their imaginations run wild.

Main Idea

1. What is the main idea of the first paragraph on page 4?
2. Why did so many scholar-officials build gardens?

¹⁰**virtue**: moral goodness, such as honesty or clean living

¹¹**hectare**: a unit for measuring area, equal to 10,000 sq. m. or about 2.47 acres in size

¹²**weather**: damaged by sun, wind and rain

The Dian Chun Yi is meant to represent a natural mountain scene and flowers would be out of place in such a setting. Rather, the most common plant in the garden is bamboo, because it is able to bend without breaking, always returning upright no matter how hard the wind—in much the same way that an honest person should show strength and stay on the straight and narrow. The general feeling of the garden is one of quiet reflection. While the physical senses are engaged—sight, sound, touch, smell—visiting the garden was meant to be as much an intellectual experience as an emotional experience.

The Dian Chun Yi is but a small part of the Master of Net's Garden. The main garden has as its focus a small pond, no more than 20 meters long on each side, surrounded by walls and paths. Around its edges are a pavilion, rock features, hills, and plants that create completely different landscape scenes depending upon one's viewing point. Everything in this tiny delight was carefully chosen to give the appearance of much more space and a much larger natural setting than is possible in everyday life.



Wangshi Yuan



Infer Meaning

1. Perhaps what did Shi Zhengzhi like more than fishing?
2. Why is *taihu* stone used in many Suzhou gardens?
3. Why do people think the garden in the *Dream of the Red Mansions* may have been modeled after the Humble Administrator's Garden?

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing **A, B, C,** or **D.**

- In the second paragraph on page 4, *them* refers to _____.
 - wooden sofas and chairs
 - rocks and bamboo
 - latticed windows
 - windows that create frames
- A good heading for the second paragraph on page 8 is _____.
 - Rocks That Inspire
 - Local Rocks Used in Suzhou Gardens
 - Artists Make Rocks Weathered and Full of Holes
 - Letting Your Imagination Run Wild
- A person who stays on the straight and narrow _____.
 - always walks along paths that are straight and narrow
 - refuses to ever bend
 - lives a life of virtue and avoids corruption
 - likes bamboo plants
- How were the names of the features of Suzhou gardens often chosen?
 - They were chosen because they accurately describe the feature.
 - They were chosen for the picture they give and to show the owner's attitude towards life.
 - They were named after a poem.
 - They were named after a famous person.
- Which of the following gardens is known for the character of its owners?
 - Lingering Garden
 - Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty
 - Garden of Cultivation
 - Canglang Pavilion

B. Label the Pictures. Label the pictures with the words below.

bamboo grove lotus pond	couplet moon gate	covered passage pavilion	latticed window rockery
			
_____	_____	_____	_____
			
_____	_____	_____	_____

C. Answer the Questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

- Why do you think they decided to recreate the Dian Chun Yi at the Metropolitan Museum of Art?
- What do the Suzhou gardens tell you about ancient Chinese culture?
- If you were going to make your own classical Chinese garden, what features would you include, and what would you call your garden? Why?



The Summer Palace A Grand Imperial Garden

Track 2

The most famous imperial garden in China is the Summer Palace in Beijing. At about three square kilometers in size, this man-made wonder in the northwest of Beijing is an outstanding example of classical Chinese landscape design.

The Summer Palace, originally named Qingyi Yuan (the Garden of Clear Ripples), was created by Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799). In 1750, he decided to build a garden for his mother, using one of his favorite spots in China, West Lake in Hangzhou, as his inspiration. Building the garden was a tremendous job which took about 15 years to complete. A small lake was enlarged and deepened to form the focus of the garden. Much like West Lake, which is divided by causeways, this lake was also divided into three sections—West Lake, South Lake, and Kunming Lake. Altogether, 75% of the Summer Palace is covered by water. Soil from this work was used to increase the height of Longevity Hill, which overlooks the northern end of Kunming Lake. Facing the lake at the front of the hill are many halls, pavilions, and courtyards.

Just inside the main, eastern gate of the garden is the Hall of Benevolence and Longevity, which is where the imperial family stayed and did most of its business when it visited the garden. Behind this hall is a rockery based upon the one in the Lion Grove Garden in Suzhou. Leading from the Hall and running between Kunming Lake and Longevity Hill, is the Long Corridor. This covered passage is 728 meters long and it is decorated with more than 14,000 paintings. Each painting has a different theme, including beautiful landscapes or peonies blooming, or scenes from *Journey to the West*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and more. At the western end of the Long Corridor in Kunming Lake is the Stone Boat. This marble boat is one of the most famous symbols of the Summer Palace.

Like most gardens, the Summer Palace is separated up into many smaller sections, each with its own theme and attractions, most of which are situated around the north of Kunming Lake and Longevity Hill. However, even when you journey away from the central area of the garden, there are many treasures to see. For example, in the south of Kunming Lake is Nanhu Island, which is connected to land by a 17-arch bridge; and the western causeway was built with the same design as one of the causeways in West Lake in Hangzhou.

The Summer Palace was severely damaged in 1860 because of the Anglo-French Allied Forces' invasion. It was rebuilt and named Yihe Yuan (the Garden of Health and Harmony) in the late 19th century. Most of the original features of the garden still exist, and today it is considered a masterpiece of garden design.

Word Count: 442
Time: _____

