

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Suzhou (China)

No 813

Identification

Nomination The Classical Gardens of Suzhou

Location Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province

State Party People's Republic of China

Date 26 July 1996

Justification by State Party

Chinese classical gardens form a system of art that takes pride in its high artistic achievement and unique style. The classical gardens of Suzhou represent the most refined form of Chinese classical garden.

These gardens reflect the development of politics, economy, and culture in ancient China. The gardens of Suzhou represent the development of Chinese landscape garden design over more than two thousand years. Their perfect structure and high level of preservation result from the involvement of many branches of the natural and social sciences and therefore contribute greatly to the study of Chinese architecture, humanities, aesthetics, philosophy, botany, hydraulic engineering, environmental science, and folklore.

The art of landscape gardening in China stems from painting, and in particular the freehand brushwork of the Tang and Song periods. Two types of garden have developed over the centuries. On the one hand there are the magnificent Imperial gardens around Beijing, and on the other the private gardens to be found in Suzhou. The quiet elegance and subtlety of the latter contrast strongly with the grandeur of the former.

The classical gardens of Suzhou form an integral part of the ensemble of house and garden. They succeed in combining two apparently irreconcilable human aspirations - to live in a comfortable house and to live close to nature. The buildings with which the gardens are associated, are typical of those in the region south of the Yangtze river in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and illustrate the high level of civilization in this region. They had a profound influence on house styles in the whole region.

There are many features of the gardens which carry the message of traditional culture. Inscriptions, carvings, choice of trees and plants, and garden layouts all illustrate beliefs and philosophies such as Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism.

The four gardens included in this nomination - the Humble Administrator's Garden, the Lingerer Garden, the Garden of the Master of Nets, and the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty - represent the acme of Chinese landscape garden design. Complex landscapes of pavilions, terraces, towers, rocks, hills, streams, and pools are formed with great subtlety and skill in a small area, re-creating natural beauty and harmonizing natural and human aesthetics. Much of this is attributable to the fact that the two great masters of Chinese landscape gardening, Ji Cheng and Wen Zhengheng, were natives of Suzhou and based their fundamental treatises on the gardens of the town.

Criteria i, ii, and v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, these gardens are *sites*.

History and Description

History

The city of Suzhou is situated in the Lower Yangtze Basin alongside Lake Tai. It was founded in 514 BC as the capital of the Wu Kingdom, and has remained the political, economic, and cultural centre of the region since that time.

The earliest gardens in Suzhou date back to its foundation in the 6th century BC, but it was during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and in particular the 16th to 18th centuries, that the city's prosperity resulted in the creation of as many as two hundred gardens within its walls. Their quality and profusion earned Suzhou the title of the "Earthly Paradise."

The oldest of the four gardens that form this nomination is probably the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty, whose origins go back to the end of the 16th century, when it belonged to the Royal Academician Shen Shixing.

The Humble Administrator's Garden has been the site of the residence of Suzhou notables since the 2nd century AD. It was the Ming Imperial Inspector Wang Xianchen who built the present complex, when he retired from public life in 1509 and returned to his native city.

The Lingerer Garden dates from the end of the 16th century and is the work of Xu Taishi, also a high Imperial official. Its present name was given to it in 1873 by the Zhengs, who paid a graceful tribute to the former owners, the Liu family, since the Chinese word for "lingerer" is similar to the name of this family.

When Deputy Minister Shi Zhengzhi lived in Suzhou in the late 12th century he called his house "The Fisherman's Retreat," and this idea was picked up in late 18th century by Song Zongyuan when he created the Garden of the Master of the Nets.

Description

The classical Suzhou garden is a microcosm of the world depicted in the basic elements of water, stone, plants, and buildings. The Humble Administrator's Garden, the Lingering Garden, the Garden of the Master of Nets, and the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty, which make up this nomination, are the finest examples of the Suzhou gardens, and hence of the art of the Chinese landscape garden.

They are laid out in imitation of natural scenery to meet the intellectual and emotional needs of the Chinese people, in accordance with the metaphysical principles of Laozi and Zhuangzi. They make full use of the natural topography, creating labyrinthine layouts of great complexity and continual visual surprises.

The beauties of natural scenery are re-created by means of artificial hills and water courses planted with tree, shrubs, and flowers. Using materials from the local landscape, their designers created miniature landscapes that seem to owe nothing to human intervention. To quote the felicitous phrase in the nomination dossier, they are "unnaturally natural."

To complement the natural landscapes, the gardens also feature many human constructions. These take the form of both small and large buildings, provided for various purposes, such as meditation, reading and writing, drinking tea, playing and listening to music, and other activities. The buildings are richly ornamented and furnished in traditional Chinese style. Inscriptions in superb calligraphy referring to Chinese philosophy and literature and ancient stelae add a further dimension to the gardens.

The *Humble Administrator's Garden* is the largest of the four, covering 51,959m², one-fifth of which is a lake. The central section of the garden is a re-creation of the scenery of the Lower Yangtze. Rising from the lake are the tree-covered East and West Hills, each crowned by a pavilion. To the west of the lake there is a group of buildings with views of the lake and its landscape, both direct and mirrored in the waters. To the east the landscape is one of hills covered with pines and bamboo and encircled by streams. The variety of plant species is great, with subtle use made of lotus, wisteria, forsythia, and other flowering trees and shrubs. The bonsai garden has a large collection of fine examples of the Suzhou style, one of the four main Chinese bonsai groups.

In addition to the many buildings in the garden, there are forty stelae and over a hundred inscriptions. The main house, consisting of four individual buildings, all in traditional style, lies to the south of the garden.

One-third of the *Lingering Garden*, which covers 23,310m², is occupied by buildings. The central part features mountain and lake scenery, encircled by buildings and visited by means of a narrow, winding path which gives unexpected views of great beauty.

The highest feature of the garden is the Cloud-Capped Peak, a limestone hill rising to a height of 6.5m in the north-eastern corner of the garden. This is one of the fine artificial limestone hills of great beauty that are a special feature of this garden, and which were added by collectors over the centuries. The western part is, by contrast, a gentler landscape of rolling earthen hills covered with maples. The collection of inscribed stelae is outstanding, the work of fine calligraphers in the course of the past millennium. The ancestral temple and house are situated to the south of the garden.

Much smaller (5400m²) is the *Garden of the Master of the Nets*. It is entered from the south through a rare form of gateway flanked by enormous carved blocks of stone, which designate the court rank of the owner. The fine house with its four successive courts, built in strict conformity with feudal regulations, must be traversed before the garden is reached. Once again, the central feature is a pool, encircled by a covered walkway, and beyond is a series of pavilions and studios with elegant garden courts. The layout of buildings and gardens is extremely subtle, so that a small area gives the impression of great size and variety.

The *Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty* is the smallest of the four gardens in this nomination (2180m²). Its crowning feature is the magnificent limestone mountain, the work of the Qing master Gu Yiliang (1764-1830). Although it covers less than 500m², it is intensively detailed, with high peaks rising to 7m, dells, paths, caves, stone houses, ravines, precipices, ridges, and cliffs, yet still gives the impression of being spontaneous and uncontrived. There are strategically sited viewing platforms at various points, enabling the visitor to appreciate the beauties of this superb creation. On top of the mountain there is a pavilion, and two more are located at its foot.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The gardens are protected by a series of statutes, stemming from the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and including the Law of Cultural Relics Protection, the City Planning Law, the Environmental Protection Law, and the Penal Law. The Cultural Relics Protection Law operates through a number of sets of regulations, and these are reinforced by other regulations relating to fire prevention, prevention of noise pollution, etc.

The Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lingering Garden were declared Cultural Relics of National Importance in 1961, the Garden of the Master of Nets in 1982, and the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty in 1988.

Since 1982 Suzhou has been one of the designated Historical and Cultural Cities of the People's Republic of China. It has an urban master plan within which the gardens are placed in the highest category, requiring Class A protection: this includes the delineation of three levels of protection area

around each. Suzhou is also a key city for environmental protection in China, and the control of environmental pollution is stringent, which benefits the classical gardens in particular. Complete protection is afforded by these measures to the gardens and to their immediate environs.

Management

Overall responsibility for National Cultural Relics lies with the State Bureau of Cultural Relics of the People's Republic of China. At national level the Ministry of Construction is responsible for overseeing all interventions. Management is delegated down to provincial level, in this case to the Jiangsu Provincial Bureau of Cultural Relics and the Jiangsu Provincial Committee for Construction, and then further to their equivalents within the Suzhou municipal administration. Day-to-day management has been in the hands of the Suzhou Municipal Administrative Bureau of Gardens since it was set up in 1952.

The Suzhou Classical Garden Construction Company is an autonomous group, created in 1980, with special expertise in this field.

A management plan has been drawn up, within the framework of the existing legislation and regulations. This lays down precise requirements regarding the protection, funding, monitoring, maintenance, manning, administration, and educational role of the gardens.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Since their creation, the gardens have undergone many vicissitudes. Following the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 they have been given special consideration by government at all levels. Major rehabilitation and restoration campaigns began almost immediately, and the gardens were opened to the public during the 1950s.

Authenticity

Great care has been taken to ensure that the gardens have retained their original appearance. They have, of course, undergone many modifications and metamorphoses during their long histories, and the form to which they have been restored is that of the mid 20th century. It has been possible to achieve a high level of authenticity because of the exhaustive documentation of the gardens of Suzhou over some two hundred years.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Suzhou in April 1997.

Qualities

The Chinese landscape garden is one of the pinnacles of this form of applied art. It combines a number of

artistic and horticultural forms and techniques to achieve a harmonious blend of nature and artifice to create evocative miniature landscapes for urban dwellers. In this sense it is at the opposite end of the scale from the large-scale gardens of Europe and other parts of Asia.

Comparative analysis

The four gardens of Suzhou, acknowledged to be the heart of Chinese classical garden design, are masterpieces of the genre. There is no comparable group anywhere in the region.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The plan to build a ring-road within the boundaries of the historic town is considered by ICOMOS to pose a major threat to this important cultural property.

ICOMOS wishes to emphasize the importance of maintaining the integrity of the historic canal system of Suzhou, which is intimately linked with the historic gardens.

Finally, ICOMOS draws the attention of the responsible authorities to the increased tourist pressure that eventual inscription on the World Heritage List will inevitably produce, and the consequent need to take appropriate measures to avoid impacts upon these fragile monuments.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, iv, and v*:

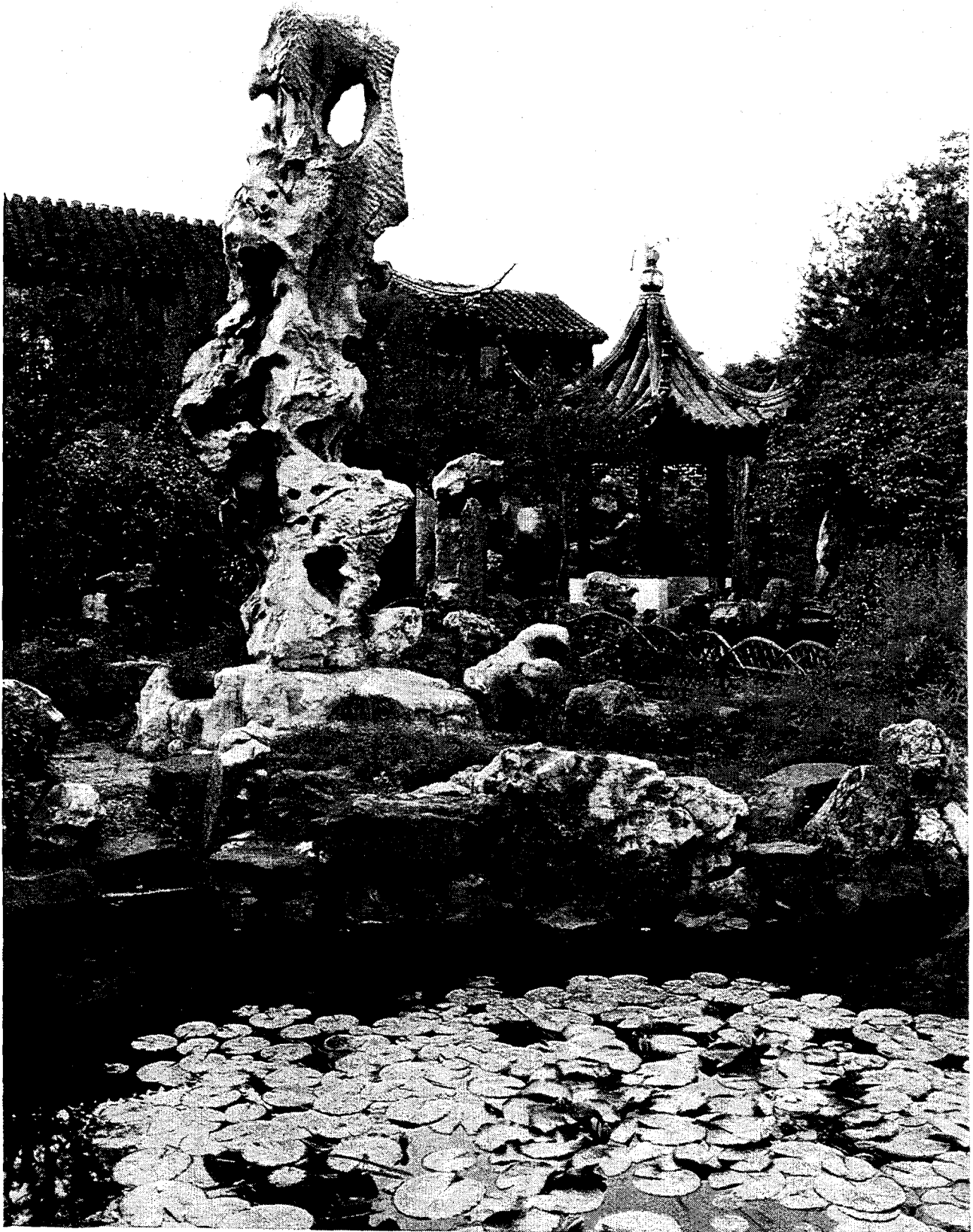
The four classical gardens of Suzhou are masterpieces of Chinese landscape garden design in which art, nature, and ideas are integrated perfectly to create ensembles of great beauty and peaceful harmony.

Whilst recommending the historic gardens for inscription on the World Heritage List, the Bureau requested the State Party to give urgent consideration to the possibility of extending the inscribed area to the entire historic town of Suzhou, whose cultural value is emphasized by the linkage between its canal system and hundreds of gardens.

ICOMOS, September 1997



Suzhou :
Le pont du petit arc-en-ciel volant dans le jardin de l'Humble Administrateur /
The small Flying Rainbow Bridge in the Humble Administrator's Garden



Suzhou :
Le pic couvert de nuages du "jardin Attardez-vous" /
The Cloud-Capped Peak in the Lingering Garden