Design: Elements & Symbols in China’s Cities and Parks

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The visual language of China’s cities feels extreme. The structures one walks below are colossal, fruits of policies that handle impossibly large (and growing) urban populations. Design elements are disparate, borrowing from many times and places in what has come to be known as an international style embellished with kitsch. In elaborating public parks we absorb millennia of horticultural, architectural, and design elements which merge as visual and verbal symbols. The comprehensiveness of today, which unfolds throughout the city, is constantly in tension with the near infinity of China’s cultural past, embodied in the public park.

To be specific, I will take Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province as my example. This city, as with most Chinese cities, consists in an expanding number of ring roads which radiate from a central square. The central square in Chengdu is called Tianfu Square. Just north of Tianfu Square there is a large 3 dimensional statue of Chairman Mao standing facing south, waving his arm. In this example city,
I have chosen a public park and a large residential development in the Brocade District, just within Chengdu’s second ring road, southeast near Sichuan University.

Just ten years ago within this second ring road there were neighborhoods of single story brick homes with clay tile roofs, winding alleyways, growing or fallow agricultural plots, and decent amounts of greenery. Now within the city’s third ring road, all this has been razed and replaced by concrete prefabricated high-rises. Presently, many older (than ten year) structures outside the third ring, and in nearby suburbs as well, are earmarked with the infamous Chinese character 拆 (chai), which means demolition, or to-be-torn-down. This renewal and development is all part of the crunch to get millions of people into housing that provides the finer amenities of life, such as electricity, plumbing, toilets, refrigeration, gas, and air conditioning. The rush, however, produces designs, material, and construction practices that sometimes unskillfully meet people’s aesthetic needs.

The argument could be made that practical concerns, (用, yong) outweigh aesthetic ones (体, ti, or substance). Yet these designs employed by China’s developers today are borrowed from the Bauhaus School in Germany, 1919 to 1933. Modernist thinkers, artists, inventors, architects, and designers at Bauhaus took a core course in spiritual and scientific discourses, where design was thought of as a visual hygiene. Bauhaus was founded by Walter Gropius, and included aesthetic theorist Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky’s idea on the spiritual in art informed his teaching of the core course, Basic Elements of Form, at Bauhaus. On Modernism,

The theorists of “visual language” aimed to locate a universal code that communicates through the mechanics of the eye and brain, by passing the contingencies of verbal language and cultural context. The modernist theory of “visual language” compares verbal and visual expression in order to keep the two systems apart from one another.[1]

But China’s take on Bauhaus could be a question of ontology. When it comes to bodies and buildings, on the interaction between the two, one’s definition of what a human body signifies or ontologically is bears much scrutiny. While China has employed many techniques of design and architecture created by the Bauhaus group, its neglect of Bauhaus’ core design considerations could indicate unique ontological models.
I. Wangjiang Park

I'd like to say right off that Wangjiang Park, literally "Looking on the Water Pavilion Park", is full of meaning. At the time of writing, the annual Bamboo Festival is happening throughout not only Wangjiang Park but also in its immediately adjacent Xue Tao Memorial Park. While entrance into Wangjiang Park's space is usually free, today it costs twelve yuan. But you get to see the Bamboo Festival and Tang Dynasty female poet, Xue Tao's memorial grounds. In Xue Tao's area we find examples of her poems carved in stone, a famous well, elaborate pavilions, and exquisite gardens. We also learn how the poet made her own artisan paper during the Tang Dynasty. When I say that Wangjiang Park is full of meaning, I am referring not only to the physical geometries that the gardens present to a person's eye, but also to the spiritual realities that Jin Dynasty architects sought to manifest in their gardens, many design elements of which China employs still today. Shuen-Fu Lin, in her article, *A Good Place Need Not Be a Nowhere*[^2], discusses the transition from the end of the Han Dynasty (220 C.E.) to the beginning of the Wei-Jin period, when intellectual trends moved towards Daoist texts, the three main ones being *Yi Jing*, *Zhuang Zi*, and *Dao De Jing*. When the transition was first made, many scholars and artists refused to serve in office, moved away from cities, and took up lives as hermits in the countryside. They sought to be in union with themselves, heaven, and earth. Shuen-Fu Lin does an excellent and thorough review of essential ideas during this time, including being (有, *you*), nothingness (无, *wu*), form (形, *xing*), substance (体, *ti*) and functionality (用, *yong*).

According to Shuen-Fu Lin, by the time of the Eastern Jin (317-420 C.E.) and the Liu Song periods, the purist methodology of the hermit sage changed. That is, the sage who was in union with being, nothingness, form, and substance could now conscionably be a functioning member of society. The development of the private garden began at this time. There was no longer a necessary separation between the urban and rural mindsets and the rural could be imported into the city, within a small plot of land, in the back, front, or middle of an estate. The sage could work all day, then retire into his garden to wander freely with nature. This new and revised hermit methodology was coined court-hermit 朝隠 (*chaoyin*) and city-hermit 市隠 (*shiyin*).

Shuen-Fu Lin writes,
From the standpoint of the original meaning of reclusion in the Chinese context, "chaoyin" and "shiyin" are essentially self-contradictory and paradoxical terms. They represent the attempts of scholars of the Eastern Jin and (Liu) Song periods to reconcile ways of life that had previously been regarded as incompatible.\[^3\]

During the Qin and Han dynasties, gardens had been spacious and open, featuring hunting grounds and ritual sites. Gardens in the tradition of the Eastern Jin gardens were situated within city grids. Whereas in Qin and Han times, gardens revolved around a platform or dais. Later the Eastern Jin worked primarily with water. There is a central pond, or a body of water which wraps around small islands, or through sections of the park. Then there are hills, plantings, rocks, and architectural structures added to produce a labyrinthine effect within which you can get lost, at least in your thoughts.

Walking through Wangjiang Park, you are in communion with nature, almost no matter how hectic your life in Chengdu is. Waterways, boats, scholar rocks, paths, buildings, pavilions, open squares, myriad varieties of bamboo, evergreen varietals, and deciduous plant life set the stage for a subdued public life, one in the midst of natural rhythms, and rich with classical Chinese cultural cues. So if you feel untouched by the nature itself, you cannot miss the cultural matrix presented within Wangjiang Park. There are nearly ten tea houses within the park grounds, some with old structures serving as part of their environs, others simply with table and chairs. Many of the tea houses are right on the Brocade River, with herons perching inches from your locally grown green tea.

**II. Oak Grove Apartments**

I mentioned that Wangjiang Park is full of meaning, but it is a meaning that has been formalized, poured over, combed over, and canonized. If Oak Grove Apartments appear to be meaningless, it may because we do not yet understand what they are saying, visually. Looking at Oak Grove, it reads like a treatise on functionality (用, yong).

I have begun to uncover some of the meaning of Oak Grove Apartments, and I have started with its name. Using the *Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature*, or 四库全书 (Si Ku Quan Shu)[\(^4\)], I have searched for the earliest mentions of "oak trees" in Chinese literature. For while there is, to be sure, not one single oak tree standing in or around the six or seven housing structures which
make up Oak Grove Apartments, there must be *some* significance to the name. Or what is in a name?

I also did some research on the internet, to glean contemporary Chinese viral use of the word “oak tree”. On the Oak Grove Apartments website, I learned that its units range between 50 and 300 square meters. They costs between 400,000 RMB ($60,000 US) and 2 million RMB (about $300,000 US), respectively. And according to much of the site’s web content, a large part of what you’re paying for when you live here is the *idea* of living in an oak forest, shaded by greenery, just a hop away from the river. But there are no oaks. And the river, I have observed, is limpid and stagnant where it branches off the main Brocade River to gird the foot of Oak Grove Apartments.

Trying to parse the symbolism of the oak tree, I delve into classics. The first recorded mention of an oak tree grove was recorded in the Eastern Han period. The book, *Dongguan Han Ji* (东观汉记), which can be loosely translated as *Eastern Tower Han Annals* was begun in the Western Han period but reached its mature form through the addition and rewriting of certain chapters in the 2nd century. The reference to the oak tree happens in scroll eighteen. There is a man named Chenyu Hong who’s double character surname descends from legendary progenitor Yan Di, in the area of what is today Shandong province in the east of China. He is a man of great integrity and insists on growing his own oak grove on a hillside plot of land in order to earn money. A band of pirates kidnaps his brother and Chenyu Hong offers himself up to the pirates in exchange for his brother. The pirates are moved by this gesture and let both Chenyu Hong and his brother go.

There are nearly 18 other passing references to oak trees throughout the ensuing dynasties, which I don’t have the space to explore here, but a reference in a Ming Dynasty geography text *Eclectic Records of the Shu Kingdom* (蜀中广记, *Shuzhong Guang Ji*) stands out. Classical Chinese geographical texts are more like human and cultural geography texts than strict geography texts. For example the *Shuzhong Guang Ji* includes writings not only on geography, but also on famous personalities, customs, and poems in southwest China. There is a reference to an Oak Tree Levy. This is one of two levies in or around Pengzhou, just four or five hours away from Chengdu, in the northeast of Sichuan province. So this proves that there were oak trees, or at very least the symbol of the oak tree attached to a levy in Sichuan during the Ming Dynasty.

According to the Baidu.com [5] website (China’s top search engine’s online...
Chinese language encyclopedia) the natural pond oak tree originates in the United States of America, while the rubber tree (both the natural pond oak and the Indian rubber tree are translated into Chinese as the same word, xiangshu, 橡 树) originated in India. If Baidu.com’s entry on oak trees is any indication of the contemporary consensus on oak trees, then the naming of the Oak Grove Apartments represents longevity, strength, and vigor. Near the bottom of the entry, in the section called “History and Culture of the Oak Tree”, just after some passages by Goethe on the oak tree, is a very interesting paragraph. It states that the oak tree is emblematic of “the original sustainable development strategy.” This is because that the oak tree retains its rich green foliage well into later stages of fall.

The final paragraphs in the Baidu entry use Taoist discourse, similar to that used during Wei and Jin periods. For example, it states that when the oak tree does finally drop its leaves it does so bu zheng, 不争, which is a Taoist doctrine. This doctrine delineates heaven, earth, the ten thousand things, and people within an ontological and ethical paradigm of “natural order”, according to heavenly principle (天理, tianli). Within the Taoist religious order, bu zheng is a monastic discipline, which requires a sage, or adherent, to never fight with the “common man”, but rather, when there is a point of argument, to withdraw to the high mountains. This is the behavior of the oak tree, to hold onto its own strength and vigor well after other trees have lost their leaves, but when the time has come, its leaves turn color and drop to fertilize the soil from which it grows.

To traverse through classical Chinese texts and flit across the internet is such a luxury, yielding information from very diverse paradigms. What I have really discovered by talking to Chinese people, though, is that the oak tree does not signify very much or strongly. Regardless, in the books, it correlates with sustainability, which has great potentiality. That it is used to brand a contemporary housing development is also significant. It perhaps suggests that Chinese developers are trying to incorporate sustainable elements into their design. If the oak tree is bu zheng, so Oak Tree Apartments are bu zheng, and hold as a fortress of longevity and isolation from the rest of the city. But unless more greenery and more aesthetically conscious design is incorporated into the rest of its presently ongoing construction, then it is merely a simulacra.
Notes:

[1] Ellen Lupton. <http://elupton.com/2009/10/modern-design-theory/>.

[2] Shuen-Fu Lin. “A Good Place Need Not Be a Nowhere: The Garden and Utopian Thought in the Six Dynasties”, Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties, ed, Zong-Qi Cai. (University of Hawai‘i Press. Honolulu. 2004) 123-166.

[3] ibid., 145.

[4] Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature, (Si Ku Quan Shu). Electronic Version. Shanghai People’s Press. 四库全书电子版. 上海人民出版社. 1999.

[5] <http://baike.baidu.com/view/642534.htm#sub642534>.

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