

Document 2.7: Excerpt from *The Craft of Gardens* by Ji Cheng, 1630s

Artisans—among them, potters, weavers, furniture makers, gold and silver smiths—were an important element in Ming society. In addition to crafting beautiful things for the imperial court and the literati, artisans increasingly sold their work to the new moneyed, who wanted to “show they could be as cultivated as the scholars.”¹ Among the many “minor arts,” garden design was one that the Chinese developed into an art form. Indeed, some of the greatest gardens were designed and built during the Ming dynasty. These gardens, embellished with pavilions, gazebos, summer retreat houses, poetry and painting studios, all linked by elaborately pebbled paths, served as miniature landscapes, “backyard” retreats for both scholar officials and wealthy merchants. Toward the end of the Ming dynasty, one garden designer, Ji Cheng, wrote a book (between 1631 and 1634) on the craft of gardens, which became a classic.

Generally, in the construction of gardens, whether in the countryside or on the outskirts of a city, a secluded location is the best. In clearing woodland one should select and prune the tangled undergrowth; where a fine piece of natural scenery occurs one should make the most of it. Where there is a mountain torrent one may cultivate orchids and angelica together. Paths should be lined with the “three auspicious things”² whose property it is to symbolize eternity. The surrounding wall should be concealed under creepers, and rooftops should emerge here and there above the tops of the trees. If you climb a tower on a hill-top to gaze into the distance, nothing but beauty will meet your eye; if you seek a secluded spot among the banks of bamboo, intoxication will flood your heart. The pillars of your verandah should be tall and widely spaced; your windows and doors should give an unimpeded view.

The view should include a watery expanse of many acres and contain the changing brilliance of the four seasons. The shadow of phoenix trees should cover the ground, the

¹ Maggie Keswick, foreword in Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, 13.

² These were either pine, bamboo and flowering plum, also known as the “three friends of winter,” or rocks, bamboo, and flowering plum.

shade of pagoda trees³ pattern the walls. Willows should be set along the embankments, plum trees around the buildings; reeds should be planted among the bamboos. A long channel should be dug out for the stream.... Lofty summits should be heaped up from rocks cut to look as if they were painted with slash strokes....

Source: Ji Cheng. *The Craft of Gardens*, trans. Alison Hardie. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. 43.

³ A spreading, round-headed tree native to China and Korea; also known as “Chinese scholar tree.”