

A GARDEN OF DISTANT LONGING: DUNEDIN'S CHINESE GARDEN

CAO YONGKANG¹ 曹永康

Architecture Department, Jiaotong University, Shanghai

CHEN LING 陳凌

Architectural Design and Research Institute, Tongji University, Shanghai

TAN YUFENG 譚玉峰

Shanghai Museum

(DUNCAN CAMPBELL, Translator)

Introduction

Late in 2001, the Architecture Department of Jiaotong University in Shanghai was informed by the Shanghai Cultural Relics Management Institute of the proposal to build a Chinese-style garden (*yuanlin* 園林) in Dunedin, Shanghai's New Zealand sister-city, as symbol of the quintessence of Chinese culture and expressive of the contributions and achievements of the Chinese people. This proposal had been approved by Dunedin City Council, and the Shanghai Cultural Relics Management Institute had been approached for help to ensure that the garden, as designed and built, would be Chinese in both form and spirit. As a team that has been repairing ancient gardens and designing new 'traditional' Chinese-style gardens in and around

¹ Cao Yongkang (young_cao@126.com) is Associate Professor in the Architecture Department, Jiaotong University, Shanghai, and is a designer of Dunedin's Chinese Garden. Chen Ling is a designer of the Architectural Design and Research Institute of Tongji University, Shanghai. He graduated from Jiaotong University. Tan Yufeng is a researcher of Shanghai Museum and focuses on the conservation of Shanghai's architectural heritage. Duncan Campbell (Duncan.Campbell@vuw.ac.nz) teaches Chinese language and literature, modern and classical, in the School of Asian and European Languages and Cultures, Victoria University of Wellington.

Shanghai for many years, we were honoured to have been invited to take on this project but, at the same time, fully aware of the considerable difficulties that such a commission presented.

Dunedin's proposed Chinese garden may be described as a 'small garden of some considerable significance'. Once completed, quite apart from affording visitors a pleasing respite from the bustle of everyday life, it is hoped that the garden will both occasion pride on the part of the descendants of the early Chinese settlers in Otago and serve as a site for reflection on the long-standing relationship between China and New Zealand.

The garden culture of China is a long-standing one that embodies a profound knowledge of the rhythms of nature. For several thousand years this culture has developed in close proximity to the arts of poetry and of painting. As this project is to be a Chinese garden located overseas, in preparation for the task ahead, we read extensively texts on classical Chinese gardens, sought advice from famous practitioners and paid visits to a number of existing examples of the art.

The Conception (立意)

'The conception of a garden must precede its construction' (造園必先立意), it is believed, and this seems particularly necessary in the case of a Chinese garden to be constructed elsewhere. In our search for an appropriate model for a garden that makes use of a small area of land and which also retains something of the atmosphere of human habitation, our choice was drawn invariably to the private gardens of Jiangnan 江南, that region south of the Yangtze River. Although the art of the Chinese garden began with imperial parks and gardens, it reached its apogee with the development of the private literati gardens of this region, traditionally seen by members of scholarly élite as places of escape from society and politics. If these gardens were intended as paradises beyond the world of men, they also served to enrich the everyday life of their owners; if they were built in imitation of real landscapes, even more did they present a metaphor of nature and its workings.

Circumstances in this region proved particularly propitious for the development of a sophisticated garden culture: the economic foundation for such was provided by the gentry's emphasis on education, and the consequent high numbers of local literary and artistic figures, and the bounteous material productions of the region, whilst the geographical requirements were provided for by the flatness of the land, a network of intersecting rivers and streams, the favourable climate and lush vegetation. From ancient times, therefore, the cities of Suzhou, Yangzhou, Wuxi and Nanjing had been studded with urban gardens, and particularly because of

these especially favourable circumstances of time and place during the late imperial period, the private gardens of Jiangnan became largely representative of the best of the garden arts of China.

Two further factors determined our choice of the private gardens of Jiangnan as the primary model for Dunedin's Chinese garden. First, these gardens were usually built within cities with large and dense populations where available land area was scarce. Small gardens proved attractive in these areas because of such practicalities, but also because it was felt that a small garden could more effectively showcase a designer's skills in creating a large landscape within a small space. Second, the private gardens of Jiangnan were usually built for a single family and located next to the main residential buildings, to be used as places of rest. The structures within such gardens were tailored to meet the needs of their owners; dining halls in which to entertain their guests, for instance, a study for the owner to read his books within at night, a pavilion for friends to drink in under the moonlight or a covered walkway for people to shuttle back and forth along. Such elements will feature in the design of Dunedin's Chinese garden, which will also incorporate other elements found in these private gardens: tablets and couplets inscribed with Chinese calligraphy are common features in a scholar's garden, for instance, and in Dunedin's Chinese garden will serve to evoke the feelings of distant longing that underscore the history of Chinese settlement in Otago. Such considerations, then, were in our minds as we turned to work upon the design of this garden, and once we had the conception of it clearly in mind, we were well along our way. What remained to be undertaken were the detailed deliberations that would result in a design that was both informed by the wisdom of the ancients and which responded appropriately to the specific features of the site chosen.

The Design (章法)

Tong Jun 童寯 (1900-1983), the great contemporary historian of the gardens of Jiangnan, once concluded that: 'The magic of garden design lies in the interplay of illusion and reality, the contrast between large and small, and the balance between high and low' (園之妙處，在虛實互映，大小對比，高下相稱).² The Qing dynasty artist Shen Fu 沈復 (b. 1763) discusses garden design in his *Fusheng liuji* 浮生六記 [Six Records of a Floating Life]. According to him:

² Tong Jun, *Jiangnan yuanlin zhi* 江南園林志 [A Record of the Gardens of Jiangnan], 2nd ed., Beijing, 1984 (1963), 7.

In laying out gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of stone, and flower plantings, try to give the feeling of the small in the large and the large in the small, of the real in the illusion, and of the illusion in the reality. Some things should be hidden and some should be obvious, some prominent and some vague. Arranging a proper garden is not just a matter of setting out winding paths in a broad area with many rocks; thinking that it is will only waste time and energy.

(若夫園亭樓閣套室回廊壘石成山栽花取勢又在大中見小小中見大虛中有實實中有虛或藏或露或淺或深不僅在周回曲折四字又不在地廣石多徒煩工費).³

Dunedin's Chinese garden is to be built on an area of land only 2500 square meters in size, and so will be a small garden. How then to create a garden that is both opulent and congenial within the space of such a small area—this was the challenge that faced us as designers. Fortunately, the history of garden culture in China is replete with examples of the successful overcoming of the obstacles (both theoretical and practical) of constructing a garden on a restricted area of land. One such instance was Half-Acre Garden (Banmu yuan 半畝園) in Beijing, a garden that now no longer exists. In his *Xianqing ouji* 閒情偶記 [Idle Feelings Randomly Recorded], the Qing dynasty dramatist and novelist Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680), traditionally understood to have been both the owner and the designer of this garden, maintained that: 'The uniqueness of this garden lay entirely in the intricacy of its structures and the antique elegance of its layout, the extent to which it managed to seem at once both luxuriant and scholarly' (半畝園純以結構曲折鋪陳古雅見長富麗而有書卷氣故不易得). The reputation of the design of this garden taught us the profound lesson that constrictions of size do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle in the design of a garden—the critical issue for the success or otherwise of a garden is a matter of the disposition of its various collective features.

On the basis of an understanding and flexible interpretation of the theory and method of traditional Chinese garden design, it is perfectly possible to design for Dunedin a fine example of a garden with spirit and with charm and one that is redolent with meaning, a garden that cleaves true to an integrity of design throughout and within which the smallest details are all appropriately deployed. In the manner suggested by Shen Fu above, the establishment within a garden of a harmony between large and small, and a

³ For which, see Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui, trans., *Six Records of a Floating Life*, Harmondsworth, 1983, 60. For the original, see Luo Zongyang 羅宗陽, ed., *Fusheng liuji*, Nanchang, 1980, 20.

sense of mutuality and balance between the hidden and the exposed, the deep and the shallow is, for a small garden particularly, a matter of critical importance, and is dependant upon the extent to which the design comprehends, at one and the same time, both its own overall shape and the fine execution of the details of its most hidden corner. The design method we most employed to this end was that of the flexible use of contrast (of size, of substantiality, of visibility and of line) in order to create a garden space with rhythm and with metre.

The large and the small (大小之韻)

According to the traditional theory of Chinese painting, the important point in painting is ‘Boldness with the ink, carefulness of brushwork’ (大膽落墨小心收拾); in the theory of Chinese calligraphy, there is a principle that speaks of strokes being ‘Wide enough for a horse to run through or tight enough to block the flow of air’ (疏可走馬密不透風); in traditional seal-cutting theory, the standard to evaluate a seal is whether or not ‘Within its small square inch it can encompass the entire universe’ (方寸之間氣象万千). In actual fact, these all give precise and insightful statements of the same understanding of the dialectical relationship between the large and the small within the realm of artistic creation.

In the design of Dunedin’s Chinese garden, we give much space to water, and this body of water will serve as the focus of the garden, with the garden’s various features deployed along its banks—to be encountered in a manner akin to that in which one encounters the scenes of a horizontal scroll as one unrolls it. From our experience of the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets (Wangshi yuan 網師園) and other gardens in Suzhou, we have observed that a small garden that takes as its focus a body of water can achieve a sense of larger space. More importantly, however, quite apart from providing for a broad and open surface of water as a central focus, when this use of water is associated with the clever use of the techniques of borrowing views, obstructed views, enclosure and separation, we can hereby design a variety of spaces of differing size, shape and structure which can then stand in a relationship that is both complementary and contrasting to the central feature of the lake. ‘Without the large, there is no small’, we are told, ‘without the small the large cannot exist’; without the layout of the small courtyards, then the wide open vista of the lake would not be at all noteworthy. Aware, therefore, that real largeness is not a possibility within such a small space, the issue was rather the evocation of the artistic effect of the sense of largeness and its psychological impact by means of the appropriate use of garden design methods. On this topic, the classical garden

expert Chen Congzhou 陳從周 (1918-2000) notes in his *On Chinese Gardens* (*Shuo yuan* 說園) that: ‘The more sparsely a garden is laid out, the more spacious it feels and more changes there are, thus creating a sense of boundless space within a limited area’ (園林空間越分隔，感到越大，越有變化，以有限面積，造無限空間).⁴

Moreover, in terms of the contrast established within the garden between large and small, quite apart from attending to and controlling the alternation of the appearance of the large and the small and the associated psychological feelings of rhythm and harmony, the critical factor is the creation within a small space of the dramatic effect of the transformation of the small into the large. The couplet that goes:

“Just as the space taken by ten tablets is not small,
So too can all the various peaks never exhaust the marvels of nature”

captures something of the ability of a small space to nonetheless encompass the splendours of the universe. In our plan, we have partitioned off numerous spaces of differing sizes and shapes, each of which, through the skilled use of the traditional methods of garden making, has been given its own poise, its own individual character and its own theme, and by bringing these spaces into such close proximity the garden will thereby be able to make manifest the constant replacement of one season by another and the consequent transformation of the scenery. Through the process of careful design, the few is made superior to the many, the small superior to the large, this resulting in a garden in which each and every feature, each fistful of soil or dipperful of water, will embody the affective properties of the natural landscape.

The Real and the Illusory (虛實之韻)

A work entitled *Conversations at Night* (*Dui chuang ye yu* 對床夜語) by the Southern Song dynasty poet and critic Fan Xiwen 范晞文 (fl. 1180s) contains the following passage:

To not take the illusory as illusory, but rather make the real appear illusory, to transform the scene in front of one’s eyes into affections and thoughts, in a manner in which everything appears as natural as the scudding clouds or flowing water—this is the true difficulty.

⁴ Chen Congzhou, *On Chinese Gardens*, Shanghai, 1984, 6.

(不以虛為虛而以實為虛化景物為情思從首至尾自然如行雲流水此其難也).⁵

In the process of designing this garden, we attended to the need for it both to be natural but also to be replete with affections, to merge the living with the emotional. In this respect, the appropriate management of the relationship between the real and the illusory elements of the design was of critical importance.

Thus, it is in the disposition of the various features of the garden this contrast between the real and the illusory is manifested essentially in the following manner: if the peaks of the rockery are real, the surface of the pond provides for the illusory; scenic spots are real, the spaces created between these spots are full of the illusory; whereas proximate scenery is real, that in the distance is illusory; that which appears on both sides of the paths and the winding covered walkway may be real, but that hidden behind the trees or the architectural features of the garden is illusory; the Tower and the Main Hall stand real as life, but the courtyards are illusory; the bright is real, the dark an illusion; the material objects within the garden are real, but the shadows they cast are illusory. Through the ingenious use of this contrast between the real and the illusory, one can ensure that the real vistas (*shijing* 實景) seem palpable and solid but at the same time the illusory vistas (*xujing* 虛景) are such that they will inspire in Chinese visitors to the garden a boundless sense of distant longing for the landscapes of their homeland.

The Expansive Vistas and the Hidden Mysteries (曠奧之韻)

Expansive vistas (*kuang* 曠) are open, expansive and suffused with light, whereas hidden mysteries (*ao* 奧), in contrast, are characterised by their narrowness, their constriction and their darkness, and yet the contrast between the two should never be simplified as being merely one of size in space, but rather may be understood as being an expression of the essential nature of space itself and its atmosphere. During the Tang dynasty the poet and essayist Liu Zongyuan 劉宗元 (773-819) identified these two properties as representing the two modes of travel and landscape appreciation;⁶ the two

⁵ For which, see Ding Fubao 丁福保, comp., *Lidai shihua xubian* 歷代詩話續編 [Discussions of Poetry Down Through the Ages: Continuation], Beijing, 1983, Volume 1, 421.

⁶ Liu Zongyuan's celebrated 'Yongzhou longxingsi dongqiu ji' 永州龍興寺東丘記 [Record of the East Mound of the Dragon Rising Temple of Yong Prefecture] begins: 'In general terms, the modes of travels are twofold—expansive vistas or hidden mysteries—

have also featured importantly in the discourse on garden design and many are the instances in this design where the affective contrast between expansive vistas and hidden mysteries will produce powerful artistic effects.

For example, entering through the gate of the garden and proceeding on through the gatehouse, once one is beyond the Flying Canopy, all one will be able to see will be a thin horizontal strip of water and a small corner of the rockery. Further along the Covered Walkway, a corner of the Small Plantain Courtyard and another section of dense vegetation will come into sight. But it will be only once one is past the Half Pavilion and the Enclosed Walkway and has reached the Walkway Above the Water that one will be able to see the lake in its entirety and take in all the main structures of the garden—this spot being where the Main Hall will be situated. This type of exquisitely arranged visual experience within this small garden will serve to offer visitors something that is both rhythmic and, spiritually, endlessly meaningful.

The Winding and the Straight (曲直之韻)

In his *Record of the Famous Gardens of Luoyang* (*Luoyang mingyuan ji* 洛陽名園記), the Song dynasty scholar Li Gefei 李格非 (c. 1041-1101), when describing the garden owned by Fu Bi 富弼 (1004-83), the Duke of Zheng (鄭公), wrote: ‘So every curve and line, each open space or hidden recess, is imbued with the profoundest reflection’ (逶迤衡直闔爽深密皆曲有奧思).⁷

In terms of the method of garden design, the winding is the more important aspect of the contrast between the winding and the straight. In the various design methods discussed in Ji Cheng’s 計成 (b. 1582) *The Craft of Gardens* (*Yuan ye* 園冶), for instance, ‘it matters not that the paths are hidden away, as long as they are deployed in a manner that twists and turns’ (不妨偏徑頓置婉轉), ‘curving with the contours of the ground, winding with the dynamic configuration of the land’ (隨形而彎依勢而曲) and so on. Each is about ‘the winding’ or ‘replacing the straight with the winding’ (以曲帶直).⁸

and that is all’ (游之適大率有二曠如也奧如也如斯而已), for which, see *Liu Zongyuan ji* 柳宗元集 [Collected Works of Liu Zongyuan], Beijing, 1979, Volume 3, 748.

⁷ For an annotated version of this celebrated record, see Chen Zhi 陳植 and Zhang Gongchi 張公弛, eds., *Zhongguo lidai mingyuan ji xuanzhu* 中國歷代名園記選注 [Famous Chinese Garden Records Down Through the Ages], Hefei, 1983, 38-55. For an English-language translation, see Philip Watson, ‘Famous Gardens of Luoyang, by Li Gefei: Translation with Introduction’, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 24, 1 (2004): 38-54 (this extract, 42).

⁸ For which, see Chen Zhi 陳植, ed., *Yuan ye zhushi* 園冶注釋 [The Craft of Gardens: Annotated and Explained], Beijing, 1981, 41 and 84. For a complete translation of this

In the design of Dunedin's Chinese garden, therefore, we have included numerous winding paths, winding walkways and winding ponds, in order to make the scenic route through the garden both abundant and variegated in terms of its sensory impact, and thus layering the scenic appearance of the garden and creating within its small space as many different landscapes as possible in a manner that is abundantly pictorial and which conspires to lend the garden an enhanced air of naturalness. At the same time, however, the winding must not be allowed to become monotonous, for the true charm of the winding line can only be fully appreciated through the appropriate management of its contrast with the straight. For example, to one side of the Main Hall we have designed a waterside terrace with edges that are ramrod straight. Here, one can stand and take in the scenery or hold a small gathering. The lines of this terrace will both complement and set off those of the surrounding winding bank, winding walkway and zigzag bridge, as well as those of the graceful trees and plants, and together, this contrast will result in a sense of harmonious beauty.

This property of the winding line that is given repeated emphasis within our plan harbours one further significance, for it serves also to conceal from view aspects of the scenery in order that the features of the garden do not all become immediately visible. By controlling both the point and the line of vision, we have ensured that the contrast between the winding and the straight is also a contrast between the visible and the hidden. It has been our deliberate intension, therefore, to conceal from view some of the more important scenery of the garden, examples of this being the Half Pavilion situated behind the rockery, or the Studio and the Water Courtyard placed behind the Enclosed Walkway. It will only be after the visitor has wandered a while within the garden that, just as he or she is finally convinced that its delights have been exhausted, suddenly, with another turn or a lift of the head, they will encounter yet another unexpected little scene with entirely its own theme. Such conceits, we hope, will lend the experience of touring this garden, once built, both a sense of the dramatic and an additional layer of artistic appeal.

The Moving and the Still (動靜之韻)

In working on the overall plan of Dunedin's Chinese garden, we paid particular attention to the collocation of movement and stasis, and the abundant impressions that derive from the interplay of these two states. Because the garden is to be a small one, the elements in motion should not be

important work, see Alison Hardie, trans., *The Craft of Gardens*, New Haven & London, 1988.

overly numerous and are mainly to be located in the rockery, in the caves and on the bridges, all of which can be clambered upon, passed through or crossed over. The Half Pavilion located behind the hill, the kiosks designed to provide visitors a seat from which to contemplate the vistas, along with the Little Retreat hidden in a corner of the garden and within which one can rest a while, drink tea or play a game of chess, by contrast, are all designed to be spots of relative tranquillity. The same is true of the Studio and the Water Courtyard, both of which are even more deeply secluded in another corner of the garden, and the quiet little Plantain Courtyard, all of which are places where one can sit and meditate upon the vicissitudes of life. In the process of deciding upon the overall plan of the garden, such elements of movement and of stasis were all quite naturally linked to each other by means of winding paths, little bridges and covered walkways, all of which serve to offer a rhythmic contrast between the brisk and the leisurely.

In the design of the garden, then, as stasis is the main theme, with movement as supplemental, the most important vistas are all deployed around the lake, and as one circumambulates the garden one can halt and take a seat whenever the wish to do so arises—in order to lean upon a balustrade and reflect upon one's experience of the garden, to sit waiting in a pavilion for the moon to rise or a breeze to stir, or to stand outside a kiosk and watch the play of the shadows cast by the flowers and the bamboo. Such are the delights promised by a stroll through this garden.

Furthermore, as we were designing the garden, we were also cognisant of the extent to which particular sites can embody a continual exchange of movement and stasis. The stone peaks of the rockery, for instance, and the various structures to be found within the garden, are all static; the stream, the trees, the flowers and the plants, however, embody both motion and stasis, whilst all those illusory elements that have been 'borrowed' from beyond the garden, the wind and rain and mist and evening haze, along with the insects and the birds manifest the formal beauty of movement. The fusion and exchange of all these vistas allows for each part of the artistic structure of the garden to manifest an abundance of the rhythmic beauty that derives from contrast between, and the transformation of, motion and stasis.

Coda

Once the design conception had been completed, each constituent element of the project was subjected to careful consideration, from rockery to water to buildings and to plants—each fistful of soil and each dipperful of water deliberated upon, every plant and every rock weighed up in our mind's eyes. This process lasted for more than three months before the plans presented here (Figures 1-4) took form in flesh and bone. The overall plan occasions in

us both a sense of pride and a feeling of anxiety. We wish to take this opportunity to convey our heartfelt thanks to all those who have afforded us assistance in the undertaking of this project.

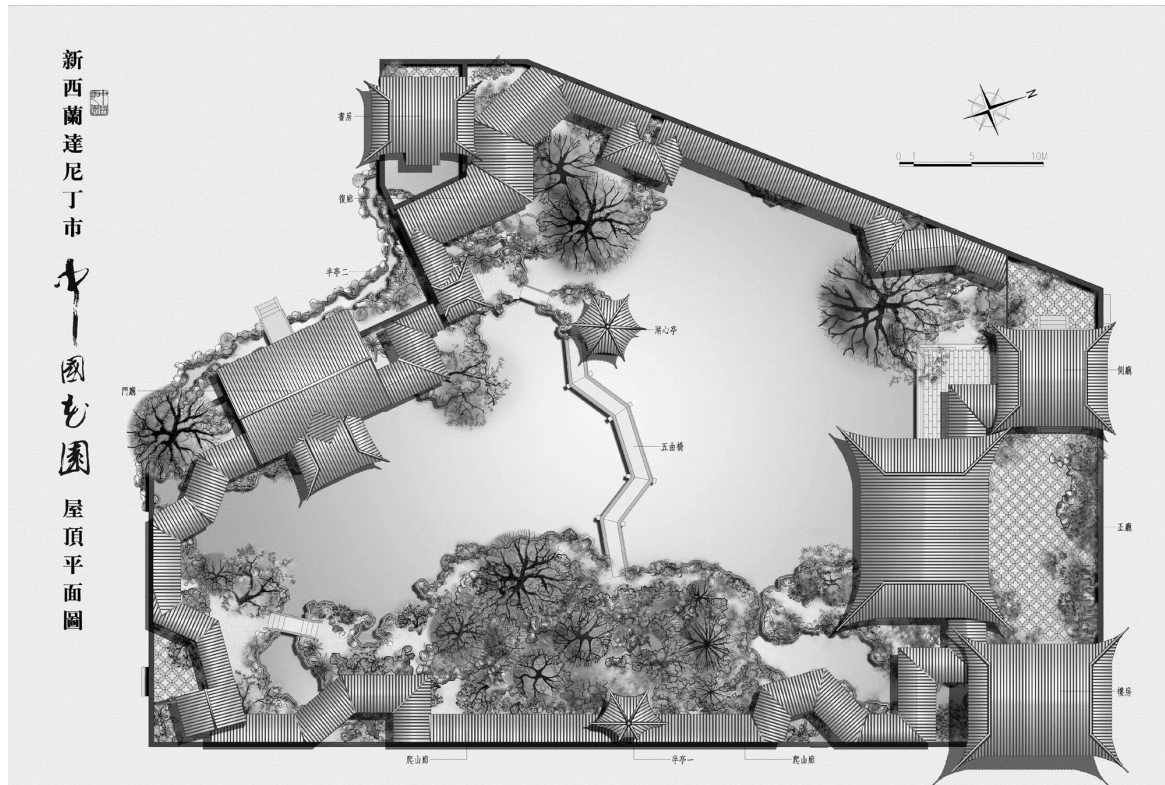


Figure 1. Site Plan of Dunedin Chinese Garden.

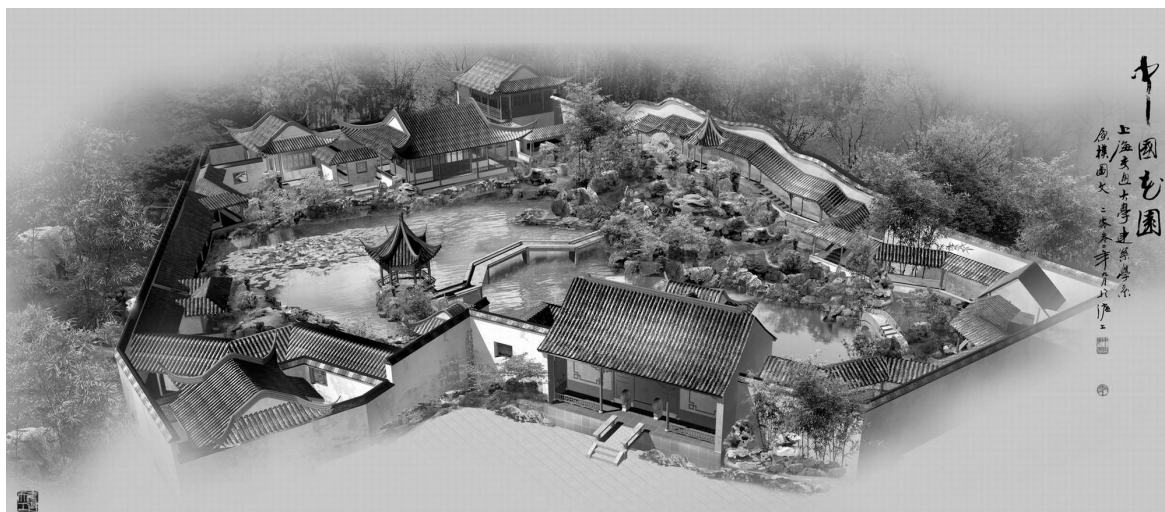


Figure 2. Artist's Image of the Dunedin Chinese Garden in Spring.



Figure 3. View outside the main entrance.



Figure 4. Elevation of Dunedin Chinese Garden.