

The Stone Garden



A holy mountain in China and an ancient sea bed in China start by giving the Stone Garden special significance. The Stone Garden is reached by the 'Omei Trail' of 22 steps. Each step represents one of the 22,000 feet to the top of the holy mountain of Omei in China. The Stone Garden reminds us of the Yunnan Stone Forest of eroded limestone in China. This forest has naturally occurring rock formations that have been thrust up from an ancient sea bed. 270 million years ago this 300 square kilometre area was sea.

Then looking at some of the aesthetic elements in a Chinese garden adds to the power of the Stone Garden.

Odd numbers results in a sense of natural asymmetry. Notice there are an odd number of islands in the dry seabed - 5 islands.

The triangle is another element. Compositions such as groupings of stones, branches on a tree, etc. can be judged based on how easily one may draw an imaginary triangle between any three elements. Try this between the islands, and then the stones on the islands.

Simplicity strengthens a composition. Remove the unnecessary. One stone can be an entire mountain. Less is more. Try filling in the empty spaces of this garden. It loses its strength and harmony.

Contrast creates tension between elements. Tension can create energy, motion and harmony. Note the curved lines of some of the garden paths, and how they contrast with

the shorter straight lines of other paths. Perpendicular lines create tranquillity, while diagonal lines create tension. Curves soften the effect. And the dark stones contrast with the light 'water' rocks.

The **Yin-Yang** is the constant flow between the positive and the negative, a balance between opposites. Rock to water is the key comparative opposite used in the Stone Garden. Water represents the earth's arteries and stone the skeleton. Rocks are also used to symbolize mountains. The light and shadow are important factors in the placement of such rocks. Water is crucial, not as a substance but as a symbol of the sea. The presence of water is not even required - stones express the state of the sea.

Hiding adds mystery to a garden. There are two islands at the far ends of the Stone Garden that consist only of stones. The larger island on one end appears to have 5 stones and the smaller island on the other end only 2. Each island is concealing a stone. It is only when you are in the middle of the Stone Garden that you are able to see the larger island has 6 stones and the smaller 3. You begin to question everything you are seeing. Is it appearance or reality?



Suggestion rather than revelation is more profound. There is a path leading to four of the islands in the Stone Garden. However, the fifth island (the one with 6 stones) is not connected to anything. Some islands are sacred places remote from ordinary human society, islands of immortal happiness. In Chinese mythology the crane lives a thousand years and the tortoise ten thousand. Crane and tortoise islands are inaccessible to human beings. They represent an escape from the human world.

The last element **change** is best seen by walking the paths of the Stone Garden. Change could be part of a garden composition through weather or the angle of the sun. But as we walk along the path, we see that the position of the stones on one island in relation to the position of the stones on another island changes as we walk. Standing by the stone island with the 3 rocks and low growing conifer on one side of the garden

(near the prickly ash), you notice that the stones on the opposite island fill in the spaces between the stones of the island near you. As you walk along the path, you see that the opposite island stones are now lined up with the stones on the island you've just left. Continue walking until you are on the opposite side of the garden. How has the position of the stones between the two islands changed now?

The design and forms of Chinese gardens were integrated with arts such as paintings and calligraphy and these were largely influenced by religions such as Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Religion taught these arts to strive to be in nature and to have an ideal fellowship with nature. Poets were inspired to write in the garden and the garden was to be like a poem.

Returning to the source meant regaining vitality, nourishing oneself with the vital forces of nature and enlightenment:

*“The tame bird
longs for his old forest -
The fish in the house-pond
think of their ancient pool.
I too will break the soil
at the edge of the southern moor,
I will guard simplicity
and return to my fields and garden...
Too long I was held in the barred cage.
Now I am able to return to nature.” - T'ao Ch'ien (Tao Yuan-mind, 367-427)*

