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Guyi Garden in Historical Transition: The Interpenetration and Transformation of Classical Gardens and Public Parks

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Abstract

Guyi Garden, located in Nanxiang Ancient Town in Jiading District, Shanghai, is one of the five major classical gardens in the city. Following the opening of Shanghai to foreign trade, local gardens underwent significant transformations under the influence of commerce and cultural exchange. This paper traces the evolution of Guyi Garden, interpreting the sociocultural context behind its renaming over time, and examines the conceptual shift from "classical garden" to "public park" as a reflection of broader societal changes. Through an analysis of this specific Jiangnan classical garden, the study aims to reveal the underlying mechanisms that led to the transformation of classical gardens in modern Shanghai. Based on historical and social developments, the transformation of Guyi Garden is divided into four major phases: the stable development period of a private garden in the Ming Dynasty; a rapid transformation during the commercial boom and temple-centered expansion; the incursion of public park culture following Shanghai's opening; and the expansion into a public tourist attraction after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, the paper explores changes in garden aesthetics and the interplay between Chinese and Western garden cultures, offering insights for the preservation and transmission of classical garden heritage in contemporary times.

Keywords

Guyi Garden; classical gardens of Shanghai; private garden; Haipai garden; public park; transformation.

From the mid-Qing period to the early Republic of China, with the opening of Shanghai as a critical historical juncture, the city entered a transformative era for its gardens. Even before the Treaty of Nanking took effect, gardens in mid-Qing Shanghai had already begun to absorb the aesthetic tastes of an emerging urban bourgeoisie. However, they still retained the refined literary spirit of Jiangnan literati gardens dating from the late Ming to early Qing periods. Amid the tensions between tradition and modernity, these gardens began to exhibit increasingly diverse forms (Zhu, 2003).

In October of the 23rd year of Daoguang's reign (November 1843), Shanghai officially opened to foreign trade under the terms of the Treaty of Nanking. Western culture flooded in. As the earliest and most established treaty port, Shanghai—under the powerful influence of the foreign concessions—quickly became the most advanced and Westernized city in modern China. Urbanization introduced the Western-style public park to China. In the realm of garden design, the transplantation of Western parks into the concessions ignited a profound collision between Chinese and Western cultural values. Traditional classical gardens, characterized by inwardness, seclusion, and retreat, began to undergo transformation: they became increasingly

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public, secularized, and commercially oriented, marking a shift from the refined yaji (elegant gatherings) to bustling shiji (marketplaces).

Guyi Garden is located in Nanxiang Ancient Town, Jiading District, Shanghai. It was first built during the Jiajing reign of the Ming dynasty (1522–1566), a period when private garden construction flourished. Spanning four major historical periods—Ming, Qing, the Republic of China, and the People's Republic of China—it has experienced seven major structural transformations and six name changes. Originally a private residential garden, it was later affiliated with a City God Temple and has now become a public tourist attraction. Guyi Garden stands as a vivid witness to the social and cultural transformations of Shanghai's classical garden tradition.

1. The Transformation of Classical Gardens in Shanghai

1.1. The Introduction of Western-Style Parks

After Shanghai was opened to foreign trade, a large number of foreigners built Western-style residences within the concessions, and their attached private gardens were commonly referred to by locals as "Yi yuan" (barbarian gardens). A folk poem from the Xianfeng era of the Qing dynasty described them as: "Private structures with low walls, a field of green in the center, exotic birds and strange flowers" (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1982). While the architectural appearance of these foreign residences was overt, it was their enclosed green spaces that captivated local attention. Despite this interest, these private Western-style gardens remained mysterious and inaccessible to most local residents.

These "Yi yuan" were insufficient to satisfy the recreational needs of the foreign population. Therefore, Westerners constructed leisure-oriented green spaces named Old Park (1851) and New Park (1854) at the intersections of Nanjing Road and Henan Road, and Nanjing Road and Zhejiang Road, respectively. Although both were named as "parks," they were primarily open fields used for horse racing and other sports (Shen, 2002). The first public park in China that incorporated Western garden elements and was officially open to the public was the Public Garden (also known as the Bund Park), built in 1868 under the administration of the Shanghai Municipal Council during the Tongzhi reign of the Qing dynasty. This marked the beginning of the proliferation of Western-style public parks in Shanghai. By the time the puppet Wang Jingwei government took over the concessions in 1943, a total of 22 such parks had been established by foreign authorities (Sha, 2001).

Figure 1-1: Aerial view of the Public Garden (Bund Park), which only opened to Chinese citizens on July 1, 1928. Source: Internet

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Moreover, as the term “park” was a foreign import, the Chinese initially translated it as “huayuan” (flower garden), indicating the difficulty of completely separating the concept of “public park” from the traditional notion of “garden” in the minds of local residents.

1.2. The Formation of the Park Concept and the Emergence of the Park Movement

As more Western-style parks were built in the concessions, these “gardens” featuring open lawns, lakes, and transparent layouts stood in stark contrast to traditional Chinese private gardens, which emphasized seclusion through techniques like borrowed scenery, framed views, and obscured paths. The emergence of specialized theme parks and functionally zoned public parks within the concessions challenged the traditional imagination of recreational space among Shanghai residents.

In pre-modern China, ordinary people typically relaxed within the courtyards of their homes, or occasionally engaged in leisure through temple fairs, scenic tours, or festival visits. However, such activities lacked dedicated, purely public recreational spaces. The functions of “scenic spots,” “temples,” and “gardens” were often intermingled and ambiguous.

Gradually, concession parks became familiar to a broader audience and brought unprecedented enlightenment to those previously unfamiliar with the concept of modern parks (Xiong & Zhou, 1988). As modern Shanghai rapidly developed and residents’ income increased, the demand for leisure consumption grew. Emulating Western trends, the emerging urban elites began to view parks as symbols of civilization and modern lifestyle. By the early 20th century, overseas returnees, especially students from Japan, introduced new terms such as “gongyuan” (public park), which gradually replaced earlier phrases like “government flower garden” to become a standard term, thereby establishing the conceptual framework of the modern park.

However, for a long time after their construction, these so-called “public gardens” remained off-limits to Chinese residents. Discriminatory entry rules, such as “No Chinese unless accompanied by foreigners,” caused widespread outrage and led to repeated calls for park access rights for Chinese. This agitation culminated in what became known as the "Park Movement"—a popular campaign for equal access to public space. In a sense, the introduction of Western parks inspired local private gardens to open up to the public—not only as an act of emulation but also as a grassroots reflection of the Park Movement.

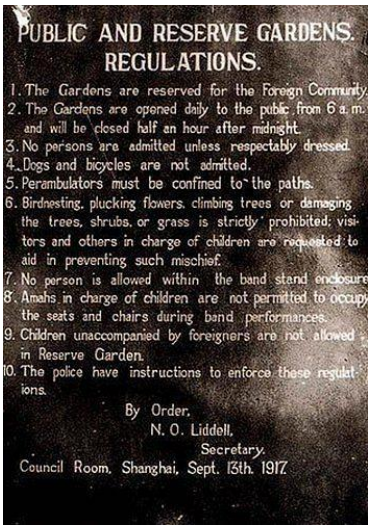
PUBLIC AND RESERVE GARDENS.
REGULATIONS.
1. The Gardens are reserved for the Foreign Community.
2. The Gardens are opened daily to the public from 6 a. m. and will be closed half an hour after midnight.
3. No persons are admitted unless respectably dressed.
4. Dogs and bicycles are not admitted.
5. Perambulators must be confined to the paths.
6. Birdnesting, plucking flowers, climbing trees or damaging the trees, shrubs, or grass is strictly prohibited; visitors and others in charge of children are requested to aid in preventing such mischief.
7. No person is allowed within the band stand enclosure
8. Amahs in charge of children are not permitted to occupy the seats and chairs during band performances.
9. Children unaccompanied by foreigners are not allowed in Reserve Garden.
10. The police have instructions to enforce these regulations.
By Order,
N. O. Liddell,
Secretary.
Council Room, Shanghai, Sept. 13th. 1917

Figure 1-2: Public Garden regulations, posted in 1917, restricting access for Chinese citizens unless accompanied by foreigners. Source: Archival document

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1.3. The Influence of Western-Style Parks on the Transformation of Classical Gardens in Modern Shanghai

After the opening of Shanghai, for the first time in its history the city became a central site of interaction between Chinese and foreign cultures. At the same time, citizen culture began to emerge, and gardens transformed into spaces that reflected the ambitions of the new urban elite to pursue power and wealth. Garden aesthetics started to shift toward secularization.

Beginning in the 1880s, some private gardens in Shanghai, originally based on the classical Chinese garden tradition, began to open to the public—particularly when foreign parks continued to discriminate against Chinese. Many of these gardens adopted Western landscaping techniques and commercialized operations, showcasing novelty and spectacle to attract visitors. At the same time, some gardens retained the aesthetic spirit of classical traditions while incorporating Western mansion-style design elements. These two main approaches formed the dual types of what scholars call the “transformed private gardens” of modern Shanghai (Chen, 2008).

The development trajectory of Shanghai’s traditional gardens also shifted. As defined in the Zhongwu Jiweng (宋 Gong Mingzhi), gardens are “a recreational and aesthetic environment created from human longing for nature” (as cited in Gong, 1985). They were no longer just spaces for appreciation, but increasingly took on social and economic functions.

The evolution of Shanghai gardens can be divided into two phases. The first spans from the opening of the port in the 1840s to the mid-1880s. During this period, the city experienced the twin shocks of foreign trade and the Taiping Rebellion, leading to rapid economic growth and initial exposure to foreign ideas. Urban public spaces often combined temple, garden, and marketplace functions—a trinity of openness and hybridity. The second phase, from the mid-1880s to the early 20th century, saw deeper penetration of foreign influence into political, educational, and ideological spheres. This period marked structural transformations beyond prosperity, as the urban core shifted northward toward the concessions, and radical changes to traditional gardens increasingly occurred within and around these areas.

2. From Jie Garden to Guyi Garden: The Transformative Journey Behind Six Renamings

French historian Michel Foucault once remarked that "the essence of definition is a form of power" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 91). Naming is thus a manifestation of power—it designates symbols and determines concepts. Renaming shares the same function. When a single object bears multiple names, it often reflects cognitive dissonance or ambiguous positioning. Alternatively, it may signal a transformation in nature as social, political, and cultural contexts evolve.

Over the course of more than 500 years, Guyi Garden has undergone six renamings (see Table 2-1), transitioning from a private residence garden to a temple-affiliated site, and finally into a public tourist attraction. The early stages of this transformation were influenced primarily by local commerce, while later changes were shaped by historical events such as the opening of Shanghai to foreign trade and the Taiping Rebellion. Western culture played a critical role in reshaping the identity of the garden.

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Table 2-1. Name Changes of Guyi Garden Over Time

Period	Name Used
1522	Jie Garden (借园)
1604–1748	Yi Garden (猗园)
1748–1788	Guyi Garden (古猗园)
1788–1957	Guyi Garden / Guyuan (古涟园)
1958–1967	Guyi Garden
1967–1978	Hongwei Park / Nanxiang Park (红卫公园 / 南翔公园)
1978–Present	Guyi Garden

The Stable Evolution of a Private Garden in the Ming Dynasty

The Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed the final flourishing of classical Chinese garden culture (Yang & Lu, 2001). As economic prosperity blossomed in the Jiangnan region, gardens became symbols of elite identity. As Tong Jun noted, "Wherever there were wealthy officials, merchants, or scholars, private gardens gathered, and their finest examples concentrated in the Jiangnan region" (Tong, 1930s/1985).

Guyi Garden was initially built by a member of the Min family from Huizhou during the Jiajing reign of the Ming dynasty (1522–1566). It was originally named Jie Garden. In the late Wanli period (1604–1620), amid growing prosperity in the region and the rise of new art forms such as Jiading bamboo carving, the owner's son Min Shanglian renamed it Yi Garden. Designed by master bamboo carver Zhu Sansong, the garden adopted a "one pond, dry bamboo" layout, with a 10-mu garden and a 5-mu residential section.

During the early Chongzhen period, Yi Garden was sold to scholar Li Yizhi. In 1644 (Chongzhen 17), the garden changed hands following a "slave revolt" incident, eventually being owned by the Lu and Li families for over a century. In 1746 (Qianlong 11), merchant Ye Jin from Dongting purchased and expanded the property to 27 mu, renaming it Guyi Garden. At this time, merchant groups such as those from Dongting, Huizhou, and Shanxi dominated the Jiangnan economy, and the commodification of classical gardens accelerated amid the prosperity of the Qianlong era.

Rapid Transformation into a Temple Garden Under Commercial Influence

In 1788 (Qianlong 53), local elites raised funds to purchase a large portion of Guyi Garden and donated it to the local City God Temple (Chenghuang Miao) to serve as a spiritual sanctuary (lingyuan). To emphasize its water features, the character "Yi" (猗) was modified with a water radical, becoming "Yi" (漪), and the garden was renamed Guyuan (古漪园). Managed by Daoist priests, the site was opened to merchants and pilgrims.

The garden's transformation from private residence to open space was closely linked to the growth of the Jiangnan commodity economy. In late Qing Shanghai, it was common for temples, markets, and gardens to function in an integrated manner. The multifunctional character of temple gardens allowed them to serve as public urban spaces, shaping both daily practices and collective memory. They provided citizens with a sense of identity and belonging far beyond their commercial value.

Cultural Infiltration of Public Park Ideals After Shanghai's Opening

In 1868 (Tongzhi 7), 25 years after the Treaty of Nanjing, Guyi Garden was officially designated as a public park. Soon after, it was damaged during the Taiping Rebellion. The Taiping forces,

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Qing troops, and foreign militias clashed in Nanxiang, destroying portions of the garden's architecture (Guyiyuan Chronicle, 2018). Local gentry later repaired it, transforming the site into a multipurpose public venue with teahouses, restaurants, photo studios, and retail stalls.

Although rebuilt, the garden bore the scars of war and the imprint of societal change. It experienced what can be termed regenerative transformation: beneath its traditional exterior, new spatial forms and architectural styles emerged, reflecting a modernizing society. This period marked a transition from refined gatherings (yaji) to marketplaces (shiji), from private gardens to public parks, and from residential landscapes to leisure attractions. This unique fusion gave rise to what scholars now identify as the early Haipai garden style, a hybrid that retained traditional frameworks while absorbing modern influences (Zhu, 2003).

Expansion as a Public Tourist Site After 1949

During the Cultural Revolution, Guyi Garden was renamed Hongwei Park and later Nanxiang Park, and managed by a revolutionary committee. As public parks came to be seen as bourgeois indulgences, they suffered ideological attack and physical neglect. Slogans such as "parks are the playgrounds of capitalist remnants" justified widespread vandalism (Zhou & Chen, 2009). Guyi Garden fell into a state of disrepair and abandonment.

In 1977, the garden reclaimed its historical name, and on July 1, 1978, the Shanghai Municipal Gardening Administration officially assumed management. This initiated a new era of restoration and expansion. In 1979, the Songhe Garden zone was added to the east; in 1987, the Qingqing Garden expanded by 37.6 mu; in 1989, the site was divided into six scenic zones; and in 2009, the Youhuang Yanyue zone added 22.57 mu, resulting in a four-zone layout and the completion of Guyi Garden's modern expansion into a comprehensive public tourist destination.

As a garden with nearly five centuries of history, Guyi Garden bears the imprints of dramatic societal change. Its trajectory—from private residence to temple sanctuary, to public garden, to national tourist site—parallels China's political, economic, and cultural transformations.

3. Artistic Transformation in the Design of Guyi Garden

This chapter focuses primarily on the transformations in garden design within the "classical garden" zone of Guyi Garden, examining how the traditional aesthetic framework was reshaped through modern interventions.

3.1. Hybridized and Collaged Layout Styles

As a representative example of Shanghai's classical gardens, Guyi Garden features a core waterscape layout composed of Xie'e Pond (戏鹅池) and Zhuzhi Hill (竹枝山), which together form the foundational framework of the garden's mountain-and-water scheme (see Figure 3-1). These elements help generate an alternation of brightness and shadow, enclosure and openness, and a dynamic rhythm in spatial experience.

In terms of micro-spatial design, classical techniques such as borrowed scenery (jie jing), paired scenery (dui jing), and screened scenery (ge jing) are skillfully applied to harmonize natural and artistic beauty. For example, around the central Yiye Hall (逸野堂), the north side features winding corridors and artificial hills with the Youshang Pavilion (幽赏亭) serving as a visual counterpoint. To the south, Yuanfei Yuyue Pavilion, Xiaosong Ridge, and the South Hall interweave to form a dense architectural cluster. Together, halls, corridors, pavilions, mountains, and water are integrated into a coherent artistic space.

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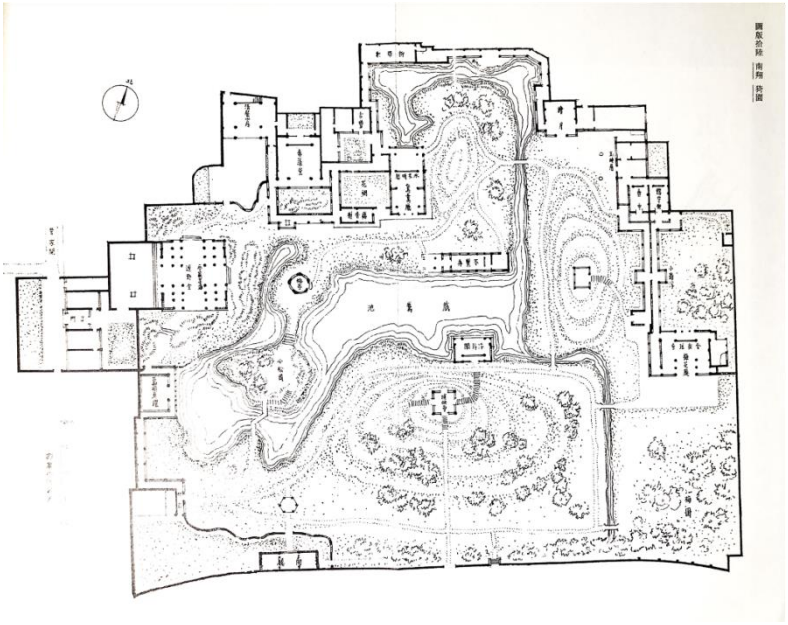

Figure 3-1: Plan of Guyi Garden from Jiangnan Gardens Chronicles, drawn by Tong Jun in the 1930s

During successive renovations, the garden paths of Guyi Garden were widened to accommodate modern visitor flows (see Figure 3-2). Public gathering areas were expanded, and their spatial scale increased to support touristic activities. These changes led to a loss of the original spatial intimacy and proportion. Oversized architectural structures now coexist with diminished garden elements, and symmetrical axis-based arrangements prioritize ceremonial aesthetics over landscape harmony. As a result, the garden landscape survives only in architectural interstices, reflecting the increasingly secularized and multipurpose nature of the garden and a pursuit of higher floor area ratios and functional space.

Figure 3-2: Widened pathways in Guyi Garden. Photo by the author.

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3.2. Novelty-Driven Landscaping Elements

In recent renovations, Guyi Garden's design strategy has emphasized maximizing usable space and enhancing visual impact through eclectic elements. The Yiye Hall, for example (see Figure 3-3), has been expanded in floor area, volume, and height to create a commanding architectural presence. Although some nuanced treatments appear on its less prominent rear elevations, the overall intent is clear: assertive spatial expression and heightened visual stimulation. This signals a strong desire for self-display, a stark contrast to the restrained elegance of earlier garden forms.

Figure 3-3: Yiye Hall in Guyi Garden. Photo by the author.

Water and rock are fundamental elements in classical Chinese gardens—"no garden without mountain, no garden without water." Under the influence of Haipai (Shanghai-style) culture and Western landscaping practices introduced through the concessions, Guyi Garden has adopted new and foreign landscape elements. These include:A monumental stone stele southwest of Mei Pavilion (Figure 3-4); An arched stone trellis across the water, evoking a Western-style pergola (Figure 3-5); A stone bridge that obstructs traditional view corridors along the water (Figure 3-6). Such features introduce an atmosphere of novelty and amusement more associated with modern leisure parks than traditional literati gardens.

Figure 3-4: Stone stele in Guyi Garden. Photo by the author.

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Figure 3-5: Stone trellis bridge. Photo by the author.

Figure 3-6: Stone bridge obstructing water view. Photo by the author.

In terms of planting design, the classical emphasis on symbolic flora—such as plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum—has been de-emphasized. Instead, the garden features large swathes of visually striking exotic plants introduced from the West. These include ornamental species like autumn begonia (Qiuyehaitang), mondo grass (Maidong), and variegated snow-on-the-mountain (Huaye Lengshuihua) (see Figure 3-7). This approach reflects a standardized and homogenized aesthetic, with monotone planting schemes replacing the layered, poetic botanical compositions typical of classical gardens.

Figure 3-7: Modernized plant arrangements in Guyi Garden. Photo by the author.

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3.3. A Secularized Garden Ethos

Classical Chinese private gardens often served as emotional sanctuaries for literati and scholars, offering a space to process personal joys and sorrows, as well as to project ideals and ambitions. Guyi Garden, having weathered over five centuries of upheaval, now embodies both a retreat into tradition and a vehicle for national sentiment.

One striking example is the Quejiao Pavilion (缺角亭), whose roof corners are designed with three clenched fists, symbolizing the resolve to reclaim lost territories (see Figure 3-8). The fourth, northeastern corner is deliberately left empty, representing the fall of China's three northeastern provinces to foreign invasion. This symbolism is further emphasized by the alignment between the stairs south of Zhuzhi Hill and the pavilion, establishing a visual and symbolic axis that reinforces ceremonial solemnity (see Figure 3-9).

Figure 3-8: Symbolic roof corner details of Quejiao Pavilion. Photo by the author.

Figure 3-9: Staircase south of Zhuzhi Hill forming an axis with the pavilion. Photo by the author.

4. Conclusion

Under the influence of changing social environments and the blending of Chinese and Western garden cultures, the private gardens of modern Shanghai diverged from the traditional characteristics of classical Chinese gardens—namely, their enclosed layouts, refined aesthetics, and elite-oriented functions. Instead, they evolved toward greater openness, mass accessibility, and secularized aesthetics.

Extensive debates surrounding the distinctions between yuanlin (classical gardens) and gongyuan (public parks) highlight the definitional ambiguity of the former and the relative clarity of the latter. In general, any open green space with basic landscaping and public

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amenities may be labeled a “park.” Conceptually, the term “public park” is defined in contrast to “private garden.” While parks are situated within natural landscapes, gardens—particularly classical Chinese gardens—are the product of cultural artistry and humanistic imagination.

The process of renaming Guyi Garden six times over five centuries mirrors the deeper transformation and redefinition of classical gardens in the context of shifting political, economic, and cultural paradigms. These name changes offer a lens through which to observe how socioeconomic development, Sino-Western cultural encounters, and state ideology shaped the garden’s evolution. From private estate to temple sanctuary, to modern tourist site, Guyi Garden embodies the imprint of every historical era. Its material and spatial layers, like archaeological strata, accumulate meaning over time.

Placing this layered documentary evidence back into its historical context reveals traces of a broader transformation—from private garden to public park, from elegant gathering (yaji) to marketplace (shiji). These shifts in function and identity were neither abrupt nor accidental; rather, they unfolded over a prolonged and gradual trajectory of change.

In essence, gardens have always represented spaces of quietude beyond the clamor of everyday life. They are the physical manifestation of humanity’s quest for poetic dwelling on Earth. In today’s accelerated processes of urbanization, a fundamental question arises: how can we restore a sense of tranquility and cultural authenticity to gardens?

In the context of globalization, how can we mine and transmit the cultural value of gardens while affirming cultural confidence and securing both identity and psychological belonging? How should we negotiate the differences between Chinese and Western garden cultures? And how can we strike a balance between efficient management and the increasingly multifunctional demands placed on public gardens?

These pressing questions require sustained inquiry and dedicated scholarship.

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