

# Lan Yuan: A Garden of Distant Longing: Book Review

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*Lan Yuan: A Garden of Distant Longing*, James Beattie and Duncan Campbell, Dunedin: Dunedin Chinese Gardens Trust and Shanghai: Shanghai Museum, 2013; ISBN 978-0-473-25799-6

Of some currency in landscape architecture is a concern with issues of place-making and responsiveness to the particulars of locality (Burns & Kahn, 2005; Griffiths, 2013; Jackson, 1994; Relph, 1976). Recently, interest has been growing in the exchange of stylistically designed cultural artefacts in the form of gardens. The new Chinese garden in Dunedin is one of these, and James Beattie and Duncan Campbell have chronicled its inception, commission and construction in *Lan Yuan: A Garden of Distant Longing*. While these two ideas – of localness and the exotic – may appear at polarity with each other, they may have more in common than is at first apparent.

The title refers to the lot of the Cantonese gold miners who came to Otago in the latter part of the nineteenth century, for whom this garden is a memorial, and to the continuing place of following generations of these immigrants, for whom this garden is a celebration. The book begins with the story of these early arrivals, why they came and descriptions of the place from which they originated. It covers the construction of the built elements in China, their assemblage in Dunedin and aspects of design, typical of southern Chinese gardens of the Ming (1368–1644) and Ching (1644–1912) dynasties built by the literati.

Waves of immigrants have brought their gardens with them to Aotearoa New Zealand, from early Māori stonefields for kūmara production to a long series from the early nineteenth century onward. If *Lan Yuan* is representative of the Chinese gold miners and their descendants, it is no more exotic than other imported garden types; the only surprising thing may be that there have not been more Chinese gardens. In a real sense it is also part of our heritage, if our heritage is that of all of the people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Debate about authenticity surrounds gardens like this, which are nominally of a certain type and/or style, particularly those of another time and a different regional place. Though authenticity is not mentioned by Beattie and Campbell, and it does not seem their intent to address it directly, they have mounted a compelling argument in its favour on behalf of this garden. In establishing the tenets of the southern Chinese scholar garden, as much from the design of *Lan Yuan* as any particular Chinese garden, such as the Garden of the Master of Fishing Nets (*Wangshi Yuan*) in Suzhou, China, they demonstrate this authenticity. In addition, this garden is discussed in terms of the relationships and associations

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typical of these gardens. The garden's layout, though not mentioned in the book, is simpler than the best known of the remaining extant or refurbished gardens of this type. Its pavilions surround the site to form a more or less singular space occupied by the garden. In the Suzhou garden, the pavilions are scattered throughout and, as such, are more integrated into its architecture, tending to divide it into a series of spaces and thus making it overall more complex than Dunedin's garden.

The book is limited to three chapters, but includes forewords, an introduction and several appendices. These all represent acknowledgement of the large group of people, including the local Chinese community and craftsmen from China who contributed to the inception, fundraising and building of this garden.

From a design perspective, the order of the chapters at first appears odd, with construction preceding design. However, in this case, the term 'design' is more noun than verb and more closely related to the stylistic devices and deep and complex references associated with Chinese scholar gardens and, ultimately, to reception (Hunt, 2004). Similarly, concepts (surely design associated) are given an airing in the section named 'Construction'; and aspects that are aesthetic, such as proportion, are in the same paragraph as precise craftsmanship.

On reflection, this structure has much to do with the Chinese association of things, which is less categorising and sequential than a Western approach. This too applies to gardens, which are not perceived as separate entities but in grouped associations with poetry, calligraphy, paintings, naming and natural scenery (Yinong, 2008). Overall, it is narrative-based with the logic of order and sequence driven by clusters and proximity of ideas.

Boxed sections provide for interesting asides, such as the significance of naming and of the site. It is difficult to know why these two in particular are singled out, rather than several others, which could equally well be conceived as asides. Presumably, the above point on narrative and variety applies.

Four direct contributors were involved in this book: Beattie and Campbell to the prose text, Wynston Cooper to the photographs and Sue Wootton to poetry. Of course drawings and archival material are also included. This mix of work contributes to the sense, Chinese in origin, that all these elements – text, poetry and images – are closely related. The garden, Lan Yuan, as such does not stand alone but in the company of a series of other cultural artefacts.

The technical information is comprehensive, covering a variety of aspects of design and build, but it could have benefited from a glossary of Chinese building terms, for example, *cao*. Dedication to supplying place names, titles and technical words in English, *pinyin* and traditional Chinese *hanzi* is thorough. All plant common names are followed by their botanical names and both *pinyin* and traditional Chinese *hanzi*. It is a pity the supplied planting plan in the appendices does not follow botanical rules and include all such names.

The book's production is of a high quality. The photographs are high resolution, even those from the nineteenth-century goldfields and Canton, as are the technical drawings, which mainly cover elevations of the pavilions and gate, revealing details of roof-top dragons and lattice-work, even at the relatively small scale of these drawings. Successive pages dedicated to images, photos and technical drawings allow for a journey through the garden, especially at various

construction stages. Pages with multiple images have a layout diagram to key the images to the captions and descriptions. From a designer's perspective, the label 'concept' assigned to the draughted elevations could be considered concept only in as much as they are drawings and not built form.

Although plenty of technical and specific cultural information has been included, this first account of the Dunedin Chinese garden is populist enough to be accessible to a wide audience, which has the opportunity to gain an understanding of the ideas behind the garden and to enhance their visiting experience. This book explains what otherwise could remain exotic, 'foreign' and incomprehensible. This record enhances the significance and standing of Dunedin's Chinese garden, so that it may be less likely to suffer the ignominy of destruction that has befallen the Fukuoka Friendship Garden at the Auckland Zoological Park.

Until greater respect is afforded to our landscape and gardens, or because greater respect might only come with chronicles of this worth, we should perhaps ensure they have an associated literature, particularly for those gardens and landscapes we value.

The book ends without a full summary or conclusion, except that the first appendix acts somewhat as a finishing point; naming it 'Looking to the Future', appropriately the authors have allowed the last word to go to the Chair of the Dunedin Chinese Garden Trust. The authors finish their last chapter with 'the period of Lan Yuan's construction phase had ended, but its story was only just beginning' (Beattie & Campbell, 2013, p 91). They have recorded the beginnings, with an expectation that further histories on Dunedin's Lan Yuan will follow.

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