

Gardens and the *Samurai*

One of the most fascinating aspects of looking at the Japanese garden tradition is in seeing it as a river flowing through time and space. Like all rivers it is the sum of many parts, many tributaries, and one very important component of what we can recognise and appreciate as the tradition of Japanese gardens is the role and contribution made by the *samurai*, or warrior classes. To begin to understand their contribution to the development of the garden culture, I would like first very briefly to look beyond the *samurai*, to an earlier period in Japanese history, to the Heian period.

The period known as the Heian period runs for nearly 400 years, 794 – 1185: one of the richest cultural periods in Japanese history based around an insular court society that ruled the country through Imperial decree from the newly developed capital in Kyoto. In establishing a new capital, a new centre of power and influence, it gave opportunity for many of the arts to develop and flourish. The plan was bold and ambitious, an entirely new city was to be created, based on an ideal model derived from Chinese sources, the old Chinese capital of Changan (present day Xian). At the epicentre of this rectangle was to be the Imperial quarters, and the city was to be laid out in a grid form, the basic structure of which survives to this day. Clustered around the Imperial palace were the mansions of the aristocracy, and the closer to the palace one lived, the more elevated rank one held in society. The basic module for the allocation of land in this system was the measurement known as a *chō*, approximately 14500 square metres (about 3.5 acres). An aristocrat of the third rank, for example, received 1 *chō*, fourth and fifth ranks, half a *chō*, and so on. In this space they built their mansions, and their gardens.

The Heian gardens were almost invariably constructed with a large pond at their centre. There are no surviving intact gardens of this period today, but there are abundant historical references that give us an idea of how they looked. In contrast to many of the Japanese gardens we see and admire today, these gardens would have been quite colourful, as they contained many species of flowering plants. Marking the passage of the seasons by the use and appreciation of flowers was an integral element of Heian culture. Many of the seasonal festivities that marked the calendar were also related to the appearance of flowers. The cultural language of the time, such as poetry, art and costumery were often richly associated with flowers and their depiction. Boating was a major form of amusement, indeed in the Heian period novel 'The Tale of Genji' there is a vivid description of such a boating trip, as part of which the participants

fantasise that they are journeying through China itself. Indeed one of the characteristics of the gardens at this time is that through them people were able to imagine themselves travelling in different parts of both China and Japan. The garden, in a certain way, functioned as a stage set for dreams and fantasies, as well as being a setting for the enactment of ceremony and official functions. This is an aspect of the garden culture we shall come back to again later. (Figure 1)

The Heian period was to come to an end with the sound of warfare ringing in the air, though even before the end of this period Japan had been riven by factional conflicts as the struggle for political power was played out between two powerful rising family clans, the Minamoto and the Taira. The Taira clan came to hold the reins of real power for a short while until their grip on authority



Figure 1: The pond at Ryoan-ji: this is a remnant of a Heian garden pond

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was ended once and for all by a resurgent Minamoto, under their leader Yoritomo in 1185.

I have dwelt on this historical background as it underscores what was to be a seismic shift in Japanese culture. From around 1185 onwards the *samurai* classes were irrevocably established as the real, and most potent, power base in Japan, and the cultural flow was to be forever marked by the different mindset that the warrior classes brought with them. It is interesting to consider that the development of the Japanese garden was to be profoundly altered not just simply by developments in aesthetic concerns, nor by philosophical ideas, but by metallurgy. The richly decorated and bejewelled scabbards of the ceremonial swords carried by Heian courtiers were superseded by highly advanced blades wielded by men (and women) who knew how to use them to deadly effect.

The *samurai* did not seek to entirely overturn the aesthetic and artistic concerns of the courtiers. If at first the *samurai* professed to despise what they considered as effeminate courtly ways, the courtly society survived around the Imperial seat, even if it was effectively politically powerless and frequently impoverished. Recognising something of the richness of that culture, the *samurai* sought rather to fashion it in ways more suited to their own sensibilities. In 1189 the ruler Minamoto Yoritomo set out to build a glorious temple with a grand garden near his power base in Kamakura. A contemporary record tells how the garden was constructed in a matter of three months with many hundreds of labourers toiling on the project under the supervision of a priest named Jōgen. It was noted that Yoritomo, on one of his visits to the

construction site, ordered several of the rocks to be repositioned more to his liking, thereby putting his own stamp on the garden, as well as indicating that he was a man of taste and discrimination. On completion the garden was proclaimed to be "as beautiful as Amida Buddha's paradise itself." Two hundred years later the temple was burned to the ground in civil unrest and was never rebuilt, though what remained of the garden would have been salvaged and reused. If, initially, the *samurai* eschewed ostentation and glamour in favour of frugality and simplicity, then they seemed to have been dedicated patrons, founding many temples and shrines. Thus the cultural transformation that occurred was to be evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.

This also underlies the close connection that existed between the warrior class and the clergy, particularly with the Zen Buddhist sect. The garden of Tenryū-ji at Arashiyama, just to the west of Kyoto, in many ways typifies the transformation in Japanese society at this juncture.

In the early Heian Period, Empress Tachibana no Kachiko, wife of Emperor Saga, founded a temple called Danrin-ji on the site of present-day Tenryū-ji. The temple fell into disrepair over the next four hundred years, before, in the mid-thirteenth century, Emperor Gosaga and his son Emperor Kameyama turned the area into an imperial residence they christened the "Kameyama Detached Palace"

In 1339 the palace was converted into a temple at the behest of the shogun, Ashikaga Takauji, who wished to use the temple to hold a memorial service for Emperor Go-Daigo. Ashikaga, who had once been very close to

Go-Daigo, declared himself to be *Shōgun* (or supreme political authority) in 1338, and had moved his power base to Kyoto. Ashikaga had violently opposed a political coup which was begun by Emperor Go-Daigo, and the emperor died in exile from Kyoto after having been defeated by his former friend. Ashikaga approached the Zen monk and prolific garden builder Musō Soseki to be the abbot of the temple. The temple was supposedly named Tenryū-ji after Ashikaga Takauji's younger brother, Tadayoshi, had a dream about a golden dragon flitting over the Ōi River which flows just to the south of the temple, and the temple was named Tenryū Shiseizen-ji: "Tenryū" literally meaning "dragon of the heavens". The temple's founding reveals much about the convoluted nature of Japanese history, but Tenryū-ji is also interesting as an example of the expression of the influence that the *samurai* brought to the creation of gardens as cultural expression.

From an early time the samurai were attracted to the relatively new, upstart, form of Buddhism - Zen, which had reached Japan from China. For a long time Zen, with its strong Chinese associations, struggled to establish itself in Japan, and it was only really with its adoption by the *samurai*, and their subsequent rise to political prominence, that it developed into the cultural force that it became. Many of the principal early figures in the Zen sect in Japan were Chinese, and they brought with them to Japan their own native tastes. In the gardens that were created by the samurai as patrons, one begins to find buildings being placed within the gardens, open sided roofed corridors linking architectural elements, and two-storied pavilions that owed much more to Chinese architecture. In the Heian period, the building faced onto the gardens, but there was little attempt to integrate the



architectural and garden elements as a whole. Under the continental influence, much more attention was paid to composing the garden scenery than before: linking that scenery to the buildings themselves. The placement of buildings in the garden also encouraged people to walk through the gardens, thereby changing the essential nature of the way the garden was used, and in doing so opened new vistas for garden creators. The pond and island was to remain as a central feature of a garden, but in its detailed treatment extensive changes were made. The shape of the pond itself altered to a more sinuous outline, away from the broad expanse of the Heian ponds that were principally used for boating excursions. More was made of arranging rocks around the periphery of the pond, as well as in the construction of rock arrangements for waterfalls and visual features in their own right.

The waterfall arrangement at Tenryū-ji is often cited as having a strong Chinese influence, particularly in the prominent use of the placement of upright stones. The waterfall is a 'dry' fall: water has never cascaded down it. (Figure 2) This, in itself, was a direct influence of the Chinese garden. The *karesansui* or 'dry landscape style of garden was really a development very much associated with the Zen temple garden, and its widespread and ultimately highly sophisticated development in the hands of garden masters was a direct result of the confluence of interests between the *samurai* and Zen Buddhism.



Two other slightly later gardens also show this strong Chinese influence, both of which are familiar to visitors to present day Kyoto. Ashikaga Takauji's grandson, Yoshimitsu, commissioned the creation of what is now popularly known as the 'Golden Temple'. (Figures 3 and 4) In its architectural form the building is clearly influenced by the Chinese Sung dynasty. Once again the garden was developed on the site of an earlier aristocratic garden and the existing pond is a remnant of that garden. Incidentally it is highly doubtful that the original building (which stood until 1950), was ever quite as gaudy as it is today. Only the ceiling of the room of the top storey was originally gilded but, when the building was reconstructed after the devastating fire, it was decided to gild the exterior. This is somewhat ironic given the Zen taste for simplicity and the avoidance of ostentation. The building itself was never intended for residential use, rather, it was a place that Yoshimitsu would retire to consort with a select group of like-minded people - priests, scholars, artists, poets and connoisseurs - who would gather to discuss religion and the arts. There they would examine and discuss the latest art works imported from China and Korea.

Under close consideration, the garden itself reveals many influences of Chinese landscape painting. And perhaps not a little of the landscape scenery of the great West Lake at Hangzhou in China, a landscape setting that Yoshimitsu would never have seen, but no



doubt would have been made aware of. The large, more or less oval, pond is cut into by a peninsula jutting out from its eastern shore and this line is further developed by a long low island, and a gap between the peninsula and the island allows the eye to traverse the broad sweep of water beyond. Beyond the central island are several smaller islands made up of relatively small stones apparently scattered about. The pine trees planted on the central island are carefully controlled in height creating a sense of depth. The inner part of the lake holds several more islands, here the stones are much larger, some of immense proportions. Many of the rocks were gifts from Yoshimitsu's vassals as a means of tribute, and small wooden name tags were placed by them identifying the donors in question. Several of the island rock groups appear to take the form of 'Tortoise islands', a reference to the paradisaical Isles of Longevity. Beyond the central island, the far bank is practically devoid of rocks, as if the distance from the building was so immense that no details can be made out. Clearly very careful consideration has been given to the composition of the garden, and the whole layout seems to indicate an awareness of pictorial composition as utilized in the Chinese landscape paintings that Yoshimitsu collected avidly.

Yoshimitsu's grandson, Yoshimasa, who was born in 1435, became *Shōgun* whilst still a young boy. Born into wealth, privilege and a circle steeped in

Figures from left to right:

- 2: Tenryū-ji
- 3: Kinkaku-ji - The Golden Temple
- 4: Kinkaku-ji - The Golden Temple

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aesthetic concerns rather than politics, he was to prove ineffectual as a leader, but became one of the greatest artistic patrons in Japanese history. In 1467 civil war erupted in Kyoto and the sporadic confrontations spread eventually to almost every part of Japan. At the conclusion of what is known as the *Onin War* ten years later, the city of Kyoto lay in ruins, with the Imperial residence and numerous temples burnt to the ground. Yoshimasa's legacy that survives to this day is Ginkaku-ji, or the 'Silver Pavilion' located on the east side of Kyoto, which he had built as a place for his retirement (Figure 5). The architecture owes everything to his grandfather's 'golden' pavilion, the two structures are strikingly similar. Though never covered in silver gilt, its upper storey was possibly originally painted white to reflect and glow in moonlight. The building is set on the bank of a pond, known as the 'Brocade Mirror', of complex configuration. The tight space it occupies restricts the size of the pond, and it is bordered by exquisite stonework of the highest order. Traditionally the garden is attributed to a close advisor and intimate of Yoshimasa, Soami, a painter and garden builder, from a family of distinguished artists. Many aspects of the garden layout reflect an interest in moon viewing, a pastime that had been popular in Japan for centuries. The two sculpted sand mounds, one representing the sacred Mt. Fuji, and the other a 'Sea of Silver Sand' were features intended to be seen by the light of the moon, when the silvery coloured sand would appear to shimmer in the pale light.

The men Yoshimasa surrounded himself with were the greatest painters, poets, philosophers and priests of their day, many of them Zen priests by training. The development of the tea ceremony as a distinct art form began in earnest with this circle of aesthetes, though

it was to be many years before it became codified as *Chadō* (the Way of Tea). It was a time when it seems the arts flourished as never before, or possibly since, in Japan, and when Japanese culture reached a peak of achievement that allowed it to stand in its own self belief as an equal to Chinese culture, towards which it had so long looked for inspiration. In 1490, merely eight years after the completion of the Silver Pavilion, Yoshimasa died, thus bringing to an end a period when the influence and tastes of the *samurai*, building on the base of the cultural norms of the Heian period and



filtered through the aesthetic ideals of Zen Buddhism, formed the basis of Japanese culture as the distinct cultural force we can see and experience today.

I have tried to show that these men of action, the *samurai*, were ultimately no strangers to refinement and culture, indeed they came to embody many of those cultural attributes, and were the driving force in the development of culture through their position of power and prestige. This is also true in the development of the tea ceremony, *Cha no Yu*. Though the actual development of the tea ceremony was the work of a number of tea masters, it was the adoption by the *samurai* of tea that allowed its development to take place at crucial times. The great tea master, Sen no Rikyu, held an official position in the court of the *Shōgun* Toyotomi Hideyoshi, as both tea master but also as an intimate advisor. Hideyoshi, born in 1536 of humble birth, is one of the most fascinating characters in Japanese history. He rose swiftly to prominence and ultimately through pure, naked ambition became the supreme ruler of all Japan. A man of clearly megalomaniac tendencies, he was also a man who, through his position, patronized the arts like few before or since.

The drinking of tea had long been associated with Zen temples in both China and Japan, the monks using tea as a means of staying alert through long periods of meditation. Given the attraction of Zen to the *samurai* class, it was natural that they adopted the practice too. Suzuki Daisetsu speaks of the art of tea as "the aestheticism of primitive simplicity". Simplicity here refers to the process of stripping something down to its core constituents. Though the tea ceremony may be



defined by a sophisticated series of prescribed actions, it is really through four essentially intuitive qualities that the essence of *cha no yu* is revealed: harmony, reverence, purity and tranquility. Perhaps the *samurai* found in these qualities a counterpoint to the oft times violent lives they led. Certainly they would have been well aware of the fragility, the evanescent quality of life: indeed they positively cultivated an attitude of acceptance of such an outlook. There is not the space here to explore all the ramifications of the relationship between the *samurai* and tea, but suffice to say that the relationship was a very intimate and positive one. Perhaps without the fostering role of the *samurai*, the tea ceremony would have continued to develop regardless however, through their support and the engagement of tea masters, they undoubtedly spurred on the ultimate flowering of *cha no yu*. (Figure 6)

In 1586 Hideyoshi built a great castle/palace for himself in the centre of Kyoto, on the site of the original Imperial palace. Known as Juraku-dai, it was a lavish and vast project. The work was finished in 19 months due to the labour of thousands of workmen. Given Hideyoshi's manner of doing things both feudal lords and townspeople were requisitioned to supply the gardens at Juraku-dai with trees and fine rocks. The sprawling grounds were landscaped with a huge lake, an artificial hill that required over 4000 loads of soil to create, as well as numerous trees and buildings, many

of which were tea houses. In early May 1588, at a time when the azaleas would be flowering profusely, the Emperor made an official visit to Juraku-dai, thereby establishing beyond doubt the real hierarchy of power in the land.

Hideyoshi lived at Juraku-dai for a mere four years before nominally retiring to Osaka castle, and handing the office of *Shōgun* to his nephew. Twenty-five years after his death in 1598, the whole complex was taken down, many buildings were relocated, and many of the garden elements incorporated into other gardens. The Tiger Glen ('*Kokei no niwa*') garden of Nishi Hongan-ji temple, and the garden of Sambo-in in southern Kyoto, were both furnished with rocks relocated from Juraku-dai.

The *samurai* as patrons of garden building were well established by Hideyoshi's time, and this becomes even more evident in the Edo period, 1603 – 1868. In 1603 the political centre of Japan was moved to Edo (now Tokyo) which was the feudal seat of the Tokugawa family, who were to rule Japan for the next 250 years. The Tokugawas instituted a system whereby all the various feudal lords (*daimyo*) were required to establish a residence in Edo in addition to their bases in the provinces. It was a way of instituting control over these families that were required to spend part of the year at Edo, and usually were obliged to leave members of their families behind when they returned home. The main *daimyo* residence was known as *kami yashiki*, and these residences were clustered near the main gate of the castle. In addition the feudal lords were allowed to build subsidiary residences outside of central Edo, known as *shimo yashiki* and *naka yashiki*. As part of the complex, gardens were also built, and the feudal lords ensured

that their gardens were grandiose, fitting emblems of their status. There was also an ulterior motive in the encouragement given to creating gardens, as it soaked up the finances of *daimyo*, and thereby limited their capacity to arm and present a military threat to the central authority. (Figure 7)

One of the most notable of these gardens was created by Tokugawa Yorifusa (1603-61), nephew of the ruling *Shōgun*. The garden is known by the name Koshikawa Korakuen, to distinguish it from another important *daimyo* garden also named Korakuen, in Okayama city. Eventually the garden was to cover some 63 acres in extent, and featured a large lake (much of the ground was swampland) and artificial hills. Rocks were difficult to obtain close by, so barges were loaded with fine stones from various parts of Japan and shipped over to

Figures from left to right:

- 5: Ginkaku-ji – The Silver Pavilion
- 6: Koto-in
- 7: Rikugi-en – Daimyo Garden



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the garden. Water was brought in from a nearby river to create cascades, a novelty in itself given the generally low-lying topography of the area. The garden also featured many buildings, as the tea ceremony remained an abiding passion.

The garden was a stroll garden, that is, a garden intended to be viewed as the visitor walked around up and down the hills and around the lake. A notable feature used in Koraku-en, and extensively copied in other *daimyo* gardens, was the representation of famous scenic areas from both Japan and China in the gardens. This is known as *shukkei*, the literal meaning being 'shrunk, or reduced scenery'. A small bridge over a maple filled valley was known as the 'Bridge of Heaven', after a similar scene at Tofuku-ji in Kyoto; a conical earth mound represented Mt Fuji; a boulder



filled stream course evoked the river Oi at Arashiyama; in all there were some 33 scenes from both Japan and China represented in the garden. Today a remnant of the garden remains to be seen and is preserved as a public park

One must bear in mind that the garden in the Far East was not simply a place for the exercise of horticultural expertise. The natural landscape has long been considered a location of profound spiritual resonance, and by extension the creation and appreciation of gardens was a means of evoking just those qualities. By the presentation of symbolic elements in the garden the role of the viewer's imagination is provoked, and brought into play. In this process of the 'individualization of place' the viewer is freed through his or her imagination, and is thereby able to

travel metaphorically and imaginatively. In doing so the viewer is able to absorb something of the quality of those places that were regarded as resonating in particularly potent and profound ways. (Figures 8 and 9)

There are two other aspects of the *daimyo* gardens that are worth drawing attention to. Many of the *daimyo* did not have unlimited funds available for garden building and, given the lack of ready supplies of good stones in the Edo area, interesting and imaginative use was made of plantings. Of course pruning had been carried out in gardens for centuries, however in the Edo era we see a more widespread development of the popularity of trimming shrubs into a variety of shapes to represent mass and form. The general term, *ōkarikomi* describes large masses pruned into shapes (wave-like forms,

mountain shapes, screens, multiple layers, and flat forms, and so on) and these would have covered hillsides and other broad areas of the gardens. Probably a variety of plants would have been used for this purpose, azaleas certainly featured prominently, as they still do in gardens today. Another form of pruning is *kokarikomi*, and this refers to smaller bushes pruned into rounded or box-like shapes which could be massed together. A fine surviving example of this is at the sub temple Joju-in in Kyoto, where the hillside is extensively treated in this manner (Figure 10). Given the long term fragility of planting, little of this has survived through to the modern day, but there are examples scattered about in various temple gardens. (Figures 11 and 12)

One further element of *daimyo* gardens that is little commented on is the practice of keeping animals in the

gardens. In several *daimyo* gardens there are surviving examples of ponds that were intended to attract waterfowl. Sadly, for these avians, there were also hides where the *samurai* could lie in wait and send the birds, unwillingly and prematurely, heavenwards by shooting at them with bow and arrow or blasting them with firearms. Other animals may have had a more tranquil existence, for examples foxes (symbolic of *Inari*, a deity associated with harvest and rice) and cranes (symbols of paradise) were also kept in some gardens, and other birds such as cuckoos (a seasonal signifier of the arrival of summer) and wild geese (autumn) were enticed into the garden. It is an aspect of the Japanese garden we do not normally consider, and one that needs further research.

I have tried to show how the *samurai* were the inheritors of an already well-developed garden culture,

and they in turn through the position of wealth and privilege were well able to continue to further that development. Far from being a caricature of violent, sword-wielding psychopaths, they were a group of people who actually developed a wide range of cultural and social concerns. Their position in Japanese society was crucial, and without their concern for the continuance of their native culture, the world would undoubtedly be a poorer place. There are over 30 gardens associated with *samurai* still existing today, some survive as public parks and some have been incorporated into temples. It is a rich legacy, and as a contribution to development of the art of the Japanese garden, a vital one.

Figures from left to right:

- 8: Ritsurin koen – Daimyo Garden
- 9: Shukkei-en – Daimyo Garden
- 10: Joju-in
- 11: Daichi-ji
- 12: Raikyu-ji – Daimyo Garden

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