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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Role of Stone in the Chinese Rock Garden

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Few cultures have revered unhewn stone as much as the Chinese, and this reverence is most evident in the classical Chinese garden, where rocks constitute its basic framework as well as the major focal points. But if we are to fully appreciate the Chinese rock garden aesthetically, we have to rearrange some mental furniture conceptually, since our perception tends to be conditioned by our (pre)conceptions. Basically, if you make the conceptual shift from rocks as "lumps of matter" to "configurations of energy" (*qi*), this brings about a perceptual transformation that unlocks the meanings of the classical garden and enriches the aesthetic experience.

As long as we regard stone as inanimate matter we fail to appreciate the role it plays in the Chinese garden, which is a place not only for aesthetic contemplation but also for social interaction and the restoration of one's vital energies. Indeed the Chinese philosophical tradition declines to make many of the dichotomies we in the West like to draw—between philosophy and religion, philosophy and literature, philosophy and life, for example. In particular the Western tendency to separate out the aesthetic as a special kind of experience is absent from the Chinese world, where the aesthetic and the ethical are both bound up with the cultivation of mental and physical well-being.

The Chinese are in general disinclined to compartmentalize—as evidenced by the close connections and interactions among the arts of music, poetry,

calligraphy, painting, and garden making. Once the dichotomy between the animate and inanimate is seen as somewhat arbitrary, along with the borders between the animal and vegetal and mineral realms, the well-arranged garden can be experienced as a field in which the energies constituting the human body are harmonized with the *qi* of all other inhabitants of the place.

If we're to fully appreciate the role of rock in the classical Chinese garden, we need to broaden our perspective and loosen up our categories.

A WORLD OF *QI* ENERGIES

Always practically oriented, Chinese philosophy wasn't much interested in speculations about the origin of the universe. What *did* interest the early Chinese thinkers was the basic philosophical question of *what's going on*—of how things come and go and come around—and they came to answer that question in terms of *qi* (the notion formerly known as *ch'i*).

From the standpoint of ancient Chinese natural science, or "proto-science," which was never strictly demarcated from philosophy—just as in the West the precursor of modern science was called "natural philosophy"—it's all a matter of energies, processes, and patterns. The world is understood as a field of constantly moving and self-transforming *qi* energies. From the Western perspective we may want to know whether *qi* is physical or physiological, material or immaterial, but the answer is "neither" and "both": the notion undercuts those kinds of distinctions.

Some Western scientists dismiss *qi* as nonexistent because it is scientifically unverifiable, but this is to misunderstand its status. A philosophy of *qi* does not ground, as in the West, a practice of empirical or experimental natural science. In the words of Tu Weiming, it offers by contrast "a metaphorical mode of knowing fit to address the multidimensional nature of reality by comparison, allusion, and suggestion."[1] So rather than asking whether *qi* "really exists," we're better off just trying it out, experimentally, by acting *as if* everything was a matter of local condensations in an energy field.[2]

The Chinese character for *qi* (氣) shows cooked rice in a cloud of vapor, and its early meanings were associated with air, vapor, and breath. As such it corresponds with notions like *prāṇa* in the Indian tradition, *pneuma* in the Greek, the Hebrew *ruach*, Amerindian *orenda*, or the Polynesian *mana*. In modern Chinese, *qi* is a component of the words for "air," "weather," "gas," and "mood," and the notion has played a central role in theories and practices since early times, from traditional Chinese medicine, through various fine and martial arts, and *fengshui* as ecological practice, to the multifaceted practice of garden making. It's everywhere.

Often associated with blood as another vital substance—"blood and breath" figures in the Confucian *Analects*—*qi* eventually expanded to embrace the vitality of the whole world. We see this happening in Mencius, who talks about "cultivating my flood-like *qi*." "Nourish it with integrity," he says, "and place no obstacle in its path, and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth."[3] Philosophers soon came to think that flood- and breath-like *qi* fills that space before Mencius or anyone else cultivates it—though self-cultivation is a way to realize that this is what's going on.

The *Zhuangzi* talks about how "all creatures take shape between Heaven and Earth and receive *qi* energy from the yin and yang." The human being is no exception: "The birth of a man is just a convergence of energy. When it converges he lives; when it scatters he dies . . . Hence it is said: 'Just open yourself into the single energy that is the world.'"[4]

On the one hand *qi* energies transform themselves along a continuum from rarefied and invisible, as in the breath, to condensed and palpable, as in rock; and on the other, they carry a positive or negative "charge" between the polarities of yin and yang.

A later Daoist text known as the *Huainanzi* (second century BCE) offers a more specific characterization of *qi* energy:

> A boundary divided the original *qi*.
> That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven;
> That which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth . . .
> The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced yin and yang.
> The supersessive essences of yin and yang caused the four seasons.
> The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things.[5]

Here *qi* is seen as the source of all particulars in the world, the variety among them depending on where they lie on the spectrum from the most rarefied ("pure and bright") to the most condensed ("heavy and turbid") forms of energy. As Angus Graham expressed it: "All things can be conceived as condensing out of and dissolving into a universal *qi* which as Yang is pure and so free-moving and active, and as Yin is impure and so inert and passive."[6] So *qi* is not just "life energy," because it also constitutes rivers and rocks—what we call "inanimate" matter—along with the animal and vegetal realms: in short, all things.

Some idea that the world is all one "stuff," and that particular beings emerge from it and are then re-submerged, is found in many cultures. No surprise, then, to find something similar to the *qi* worldview at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition. Shortly before the time of Confucius, the ancient Greek thinker Anaximines identified "the underlying nature" of

all things as "one and infinite: *air*" (*aer* in Greek). Extrapolating from the visible processes of condensation and evaporation, he posited two basic transformations of *aer* as the underlying nature, which he called "condensation" (occasioned by cooling) and "rarefaction" (by heating).

> Air differs in its substantial nature by rarity and density. Being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these.

Anaximines also assimilated *aer* with *pneuma*, which means both "wind" and "breath," as well as with *psyche*, meaning "soul": "From air all things come to be, and into it they are again dissolved. As our soul, being air, holds us together and controls us, so does wind [breath] enclose the entire cosmos." Wind captures better than "air" the essential feature of the one underlying nature, that it is "always in motion," making the notion's consonance with Chinese *qi* philosophy even closer.[7] A parallel phenomenon in Western science would be the earth's magnetic field, which is similarly a field of forces that are invisible. And indeed, like electricity, *qi* is an energy that also flows between two poles—which the Chinese call *yin* and *yang*.

But because this idea of Anaximines didn't catch on in mainstream Western thought—though we find it echoed in the world soul of the Neoplatonists, God as *natura naturans* in Spinoza, will to power as interpretation in Nietzsche—the notion of *qi* energy remains to the Western mind somewhat obscure. It becomes clearer, however, once you get into a classical Chinese garden.

Insofar as Chinese philosophy sees transformations of energy as fundamental, it has no place for anything as substantial as the traditional "four elements" that underlie so much Western thinking about the nature of the cosmos. The Greek idea of the four elements as the essential components of a material world—originally the "four roots" in the philosophy of Empedocles—goes along with an understanding of Gods and humans as creators and makers of things through the introduction of formative powers from outside, on the basis of a pattern or paradigm external to those things (even if internal to the mind of the Creator).

The difference from the Chinese view was for a long time obscured by the practice of talking about the "five elements" in Chinese cosmology—an infelicitous translation of the Chinese *wuxing*, which literally means "five goings," or "transitions," "conducts," "phases (of transformation)," or "processes." The Five Processes, by contrast with the Greeks' elements, are driven by the cosmic energy that flows through all particulars according to

patterns that emerge from the place of those particulars within the larger matrix of forces. In such a world, the ancient Chinese thinkers say, human beings thrive by becoming aware of these transformations and engaging them in appropriate ways.

A text from the fourth century BCE known as the *Zuo Commentary* (to the *Annals of Lu*) lists six kinds of atmospheric influences or energies: "Heaven has the Six Qi . . . shade [*yin*] and sunshine [*yang*], wind and rain, dark and light." Here *yin* and *yang* refer in their pre-philosophical use to the shady and sunny sides of a hill respectively (north and south sides in China, as in any place in the northern hemisphere), and they are thus associated with cold and heat as well as darkness and light.

Corresponding to the "Six Energies" of Heaven are the Five Processes associated with Earth: wood, fire, soil, metal, water. *Wuxing* denotes the five primary phases of transformation through which telluric energies pass in a continuous cycle of self-generation: wood → fire → soil → metal → water → wood → fire → and so forth. As a dense form of earth, stone is not to be understood as some kind of matter or substance but rather a phase in this endless cycle of energetic transformations: a slow, hard change between the softness of soil and the malleability of metal. Thus the Chinese regard rocks as especially dense and slow-moving configurations of *earth energy*, as condensed foci of the forces that drive all under the heavens.

For those of us who subscribe to the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter, the *qi* worldview will seem like some kind of animism or panpsychism. But let's not forget just how recent and parochial the Cartesian worldview is—no matter how efficacious in manipulating the world by technological means. After endorsing Cartesian dualism, the natural sciences could deflate, as it were, the "world soul" of antiquity, draining off the *anima mundi* to confine all soul within human beings alone. If you go along with that, any animation of nonhuman phenomena will *have* to be regarded as anthropomorphic projection.

But this modern view of the world is idiosyncratic in the extreme: most human beings in the course of human history have naturally experienced the world as alive and full of spirits, and regarding stone that way seems to come naturally for indigenous cultures. It's not a matter of claiming that the natural science perspective is false, but rather of affirming the validity of other, ancient perspectives that are still experientially accessible to us in the twenty-first century.

On my first encounter with the famous Taihu rocks that inhabit China's most impressive gardens, I couldn't get into them at all. They seemed simply weird, and distinctly unaesthetic. But I realized later that was because I was regarding them as inanimate, as lumps of matter. Once equipped with the

idea that everything is *qi* energies, the next encounter revealed Taihu rocks as simply magnificent. A poet from Suzhou once suggested that, before entering a garden:

> one should be acquainted with the historical background; enter in a peaceful and receptive mood; observe the layout of the garden, for the different parts have been weighed against each other like the pairs of inscribed tablets placed in the pavilions. Then one should try to intuit the inner soul of the garden, try to understand the mysterious forces shaping the landscape and making it cohere.[8]

So let's go back now to some of the historical background.

FIGURE 14.1: Yuan Jiang, *Penglai Island* (1708). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_garden#/media/File:YuanJiang-Penglai_Island.jpg (public domain).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The ancient Chinese thinkers talk of the three worlds—Heaven, humans, and Earth—as belonging together as one. Landscape reaches up as mountains into the openness of the heavens, and settles down as waters onto the firmness of the earth. In the landscape garden, mountains point to heaven in the form of rocks, waters rest on earth in the shape of ponds, while the built structures within the garden stand in for human beings.

At first a prerogative of the imperial families, enthusiasm for arranging rocks in landscape gardens spread subsequently to the literati, and it remains widespread in the culture to this day. An early motif in imperial gardens reproduced the legendary "Isles of the Immortals," three (or five) gigantic mountains on the far border of the eastern ocean. They were inhabited by a race of sages who became immortal by eating the fruit of the trees there, and spent their days—and their days were long—flying from island to island, sometimes on the backs of cranes.[9]

The ancient kings would send out emissaries to find the islands and bring back the elixir of immortality, but always without success. The King of Qin, who unified the warring states under the Qin empire in the third century BCE, was an enthusiastic searcher, yet in vain. But a successor in the Han dynasty, Emperor Wu, had a bright idea: instead of sending out more expeditions to find the Isles, he would attract the Immortals to him, by building beautiful miniature versions of the Isles in a pond in the imperial garden. Emperor Wu set a record for length of reign—fifty-four years—but died in the end, in 87 BCE. Nonetheless, a group of three or five mountain-like rocks set in a pond, with the tallest representing Mount Penglai (*Hōraizan* in Japanese), is a common motif in landscape gardens in Japan as well as China to this day.

The Song dynasty emperor Huizong carried on this tradition in extravagant style, as one of the most rock-revering artists of the long Chinese tradition. He built an imperial park containing several artificial mountains, and at the western entrance he placed a spectacular rock over fifteen meters high. A visitor observed at the time:

> The rocks on the side had various forms. Some looked like ministers having audience with the emperor. They were solemn, serious, trembling, and full of awe. Some were charging forward as if they had some important advice or argument to present.[10]

Here we see the Confucian tradition vitally embodied in the practice of arranging rocks in such a way that their interrelations mirror social

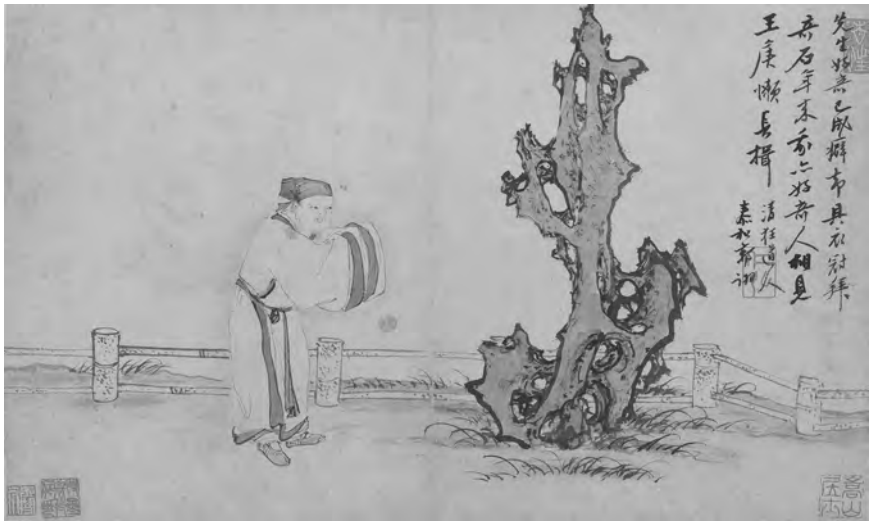

FIGURE 14.2: Guo Xu, *Mi Fu Bowing to a Rock* (1503). Exhibit, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, 2010 (public domain).

relationships. Besides being a great connoisseur of stone, Huizong was also the most accomplished painter among the many Chinese emperors who painted as well as reigned. One of his best-known paintings is of a rock in one of his gardens called *Auspicious Dragon Rock*.[11]

Another great "litholater" (stone worshipper) was the famous poet and painter Mi Fu. On taking up an appointment as a magistrate in Anhui province, a place renowned for the quality of its rocks, he is said to have noticed a magnificent rock in a garden of the official precincts. Overwhelmed with admiration, he made obeisance to it and from then on addressed it respectfully as "Elder Brother Rock" every time he passed by. The episode became a favorite theme of painters, who delighted in assimilating the poet's shape and attire to the contours and patterns of the much larger rock. The frequent depictions in painting of the isomorphism between human and stone attest to their enduring affinity in the Chinese tradition.

A Ming dynasty landscape painter and designer of gardens by the name of Ji Cheng authored a well-known garden manual, *The Craft of Gardens* (Yuanye, 1635). On the topic of placing rocks he writes:

> If a single rock is set upright in the center as the "master rock" and two more rocks (known as "split peaks") are set on either side of it, the single one will stand in solitary magnificence and the lesser ones will act as

> supporters. They will seem to be arranged in order of rank, and will give the impression of waiting on command.[12]

We should not dismiss this attitude as mere personification or anthropomorphic projection: remember, rocks are alive too, and tend to cluster in family groups, not only in gardens but also in the wild. (If you have any doubt about that, just look next time you're in a rocky landscape.)

When scholar-officials were finally allowed to make gardens, they included a quite practical aim: rather than having to spend time traveling to the countryside for recreation, they could create a microcosm of a celebrated landscape beside their house. As Ji Cheng wrote: "If you build your hut by a mountain torrent, it seems you are sure to find peace and quiet. But if you bring the mountains to your home, what need is there to search for remote places?"[13]

In true Confucian spirit the garden was a place not only for recreation and relaxation but also for social interaction: for playing music, composing poetry, and drinking wine with friends. Various architectural structures—pavilions, gazebos, studies, music rooms—were integrated into the landscape in accordance with Confucian virtues of frugality and simplicity. As Ji Cheng observed:

> The hermit's life in a city far surpasses a distant mountain retreat. If you can find seclusion in a noisy place, there is no need to yearn for places far from where you live. Whenever you have some leisure, you are already at your goal; and whenever the mood takes you, you can set off with your friends for a walk.[14]

We get a good sense of this kind of fortunate situation from the great Qing dynasty novel *The Story of the Stone* (1791), where much of the early action takes place in the magnificent garden of a wealthy family who live in the capital. The garden's rocks figure prominently in the story, often serving to conceal conversing characters from the gaze of others, and generally contribute to an interplay of reality and illusion in the novel—an interplay that the rocks in the garden especially exemplify. The Chinese garden should never present itself to the view all at once, but rather gradually through a series of concealments and revelations. Jia Zheng, the father of the main protagonist, brings some guests to the garden for their first visit.

> A cry of admiration escaped them as they entered, for there, immediately in front of them, screening everything else from their view, rose a steep, verdure-clad hill.
>
> "Without this hill," Jia Zheng somewhat otiosely observed, "the whole garden would be visible as one entered, and all its mystery would be lost."

> The literary gentlemen concurred. "Only a master of the art of landscape could have conceived so bold a stroke," said one of them.
>
> As they gazed at this miniature mountain, they observed a great number of large white rocks in all kinds of grotesque and monstrous shapes, rising course above course up one of its sides, some recumbent, some upright or leaning at angles, their surfaces streaked and spotted with moss and lichen or half concealed by creepers, and with a narrow, zigzag path only barely discernible to the eye winding up between them.[15]

Thus even in a garden you can have mountain paths to walk along, from where you can enjoy views of the landscape.

MOUNTAINS AND WATERS

The Chinese term for landscape, *shanshui*, literally means "mountains–waters," denoting landscape's two major features. Confucius is said to have said: "The wise find joy in waters, while the humane find joy in mountains."[16] In a landscape garden, rocks, standing in for mountains, constitute the framework and focal points, while ponds and streams play the role of seas, lakes, and rivers. The aesthetics of gardens developed in interaction with

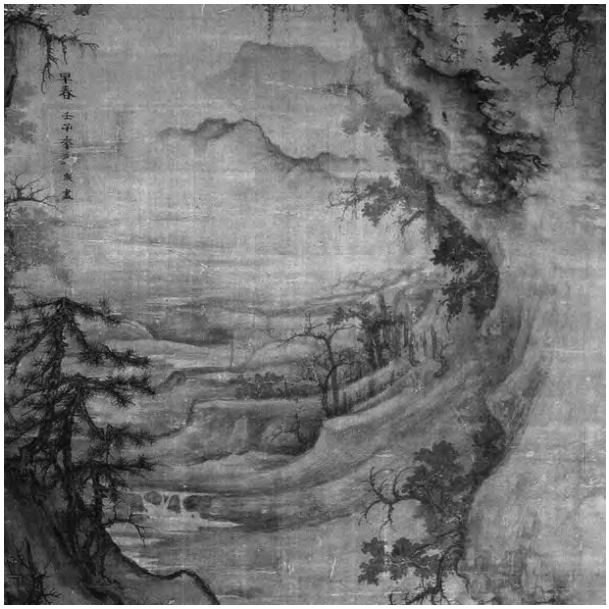

FIGURE 14.3: Guo Xi, *Early Spring* (1072, detail). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guo_Xi#/media/File:Guo_Xi_-_Early_Spring_(large).jpg (public domain).

China's rich tradition of landscape *painting* aesthetics, such that a garden was often regarded as a painting in three dimensions.

A major aim of landscape painting was to conjure up immense distances through works of modest dimensions. As the great poet Du Fu once expressed it: "To be able, in the space of one square foot, to evoke a landscape of ten thousand leagues!"[17]

A well-known native of Suzhou (near Shanghai), a city that is home to several of China's greatest gardens, was the Qing dynasty writer Shen Fu, who often discusses the art of garden making in his autobiographical *Six Records of a Floating Life*. As a general principle, he writes:

> In laying out gardens, pavilions, wandering paths, small mountains of rocks, 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 the illusion in the reality.[18]

The author came across the possibility of playing with scale—the small and the large—when he was small.

> I would often squat down by unkempt grassy places in flower beds or by niches in walls, low enough so that my head was level with them, and concentrate so carefully that to me the grass became a forest and the insects became animals. Imagining that small mounds of earth were hills and that shallow holes were valleys, I let my spirit wander there in happiness and contentment.[19]

(In my experience, the trick is to find a patch of soft grass on which to lie prone with one cheek to the ground, and then cover the upper eye and wait. After a while the stalks of grass become huge, and any insect among them appears monstrous in size.)

We tend to lose our childhood flexibility in playing with scale and letting the spirit wander, but the Daoists—and Zhuangzi especially—are concerned with retrieving it. It's a precondition of the creation and appreciation of art generally, and of the Chinese garden in particular.

Another of Chinese painting's main aims was brushwork that achieves "energy resonance" (*qi yun*) between the landscape and the painting. A painting isn't concerned with representing a landscape or showing how it looks; if you want to know how it looks, you just go to the place and look (in the right direction). Rather, the good painting "gets the energy" of the place, gets it on to a plane surface, through the artist's resonating with the vitality of what he sees.

This is the first of the influential "Six Principles" principle of painting discussed by the sixth-century painter and critic Xie He: *qi yun sheng dong*, literally "energy resonance life activity"; or, adapting James Cahill's translation, "engender[ing] [a sense of] movement," *shengdong*, "[through] energy resonance" (*qiyun*).[20] Once the artist gets attuned to the resonance of the energy configurations of the landscape, he is able to transmit the vitality of the scene to the paper through the energy configuration of his own body. Rather than attempting to reproduce the visual appearance of the natural world, the artist lets the brushstrokes flow from the common source that produces both natural phenomena and his own activity.

This principle was easily adapted to the art of garden making, where the very elements of the artist's craft are natural beings, which are then artfully selected and arranged in order to reproduce interactions in the natural world outside the garden *within* its subtly organized setting. With the flourishing of Northern Song landscape painting in the course of the tenth century, connoisseurs of rocks even began to value their resemblance to *depicted* mountains—an interesting case where a natural component of the garden art is evaluated by standards from the art of painting![21]

In discussing the construction of artificial mountains in gardens, Ji Cheng offers this advice:

> What are known as precipitous mountains are built up against walls, so that the whitewashed surface acts as paper and the rocks as the painting on it. The designer should follow the natural cracks in the stone, imitating the brushwork of the old masters.[22]

And just as the landscape painter transmits the vital movement of the mountains and waters, so the garden maker achieves this through a synergy of rocks and ponds.

The power of the rock is further enhanced by a play of apparent movement, which can be achieved by arranging rocks at the edge of a pond, so that they are reflected in the surface of the water and appear to undulate as if alive. And when the sun is in the right place, trembling webs of silver light animate the rock surfaces further. As Ji Cheng confirms, with respect to towering rockeries: "To have mountains situated beside a pool is the finest sight in a garden."[23]

The Scottish–Swedish architect Sir William Chambers, in his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1773), observed that the Chinese

> compare a clear pond, in a calm sunny day, to a rich piece of painting, upon which the circumambient objects are represented in the highest

> perfection; and say, it is like an aperture in the world, through which you see another world, another sun, and other skies.[24]

And in that other world, rocks can sway to the rhythms of wind-brushed waters.

When rocks are arranged in relation to trees or bamboo in places that receive sunshine, the shadows multiply the painterly effect, while extending and transforming it as long as the sun's gradual movement remains visible. In a light breeze, the shadows of slow-swaying bamboo or branches lend further animation. Ji Cheng again: "A mighty rock welcomes the visitor to a magical other world. Fine bamboos play their shadows, as if to the music of pan-pipes over the water."[25]

Insofar as the Chinese tradition reveres nature as "the greatest of all artists," the great human artist will practice "plundering the natural processes of making and transforming," and takes these creative processes "as his master and teacher."[26] A special manifestation of the creative workings of nature through the medium of rock is found in the "stone screens" that have long been a common item of furniture in China, and are found in the pavilions of many gardens. The veining of the marble used for these screens exhibits "traces of mineral combinations of pure limestone and sedimentary layers of clay mixed with organic material or iron oxides which the limestone has recrystallized," and thus produces by "natural painting" patterns that look like mist-enshrouded landscapes.[27]

Also known as "dreamstones" or "journeying stones," these natural images were avidly collected by scholars and officials for the decoration of their residences. The twelfth-century treatise by Du Wan, the *Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest*, which appears to be the world's first handbook of rock aesthetics, describes several different kinds. Dreamstones manifest nature's artistry in depicting a large part of itself—a landscape—in a smaller part of that part—a rock. This is an example of the "sympathetic resonance" (*ganying*) that Daoist philosophy finds among various kinds of configurations of *qi* energy.[28] No wonder the makers of landscape gardens like to frame these natural landscapes and place them in garden pavilions.

MOUNTAINS AND ROCKS

It's also a matter of *scale*, which in the Chinese tradition is always variable. A cosmogonic myth from ancient China depicts the sky as a vast cave, and mountains as fragments that came loose from the vault of heaven and ended up on earth. Falling through the air these huge chunks of stone were charged with vast amounts of *qi* energy before embedding themselves in the ground.[29]

FIGURE 14.4: Mountain peak rock. Photo by the author.

That's what gives rise to earth energies: the heaviness of falling rock, drawn by gravity down to earth.

The Chinese regarded mountains as the most majestic expressions of natural forces, manifestations of the powerful telluric energies that thrust the earth thousands of meters up into the heavens. Five Great Mountains stand at the center of the Central Kingdom and four cardinal points, while Daoism acknowledges Four Sacred Mountains, as does Chinese Buddhism (though a different four from the Daoists). According to the "correlative thinking" that is characteristic of Chinese philosophy, rocks are revered as the equivalent of mountains on a smaller scale. Not so much because some of them look like mountains, but rather because rocks are regarded as corresponding configurations of *qi* energies, animated by the same huge telluric forces that formed the heights and peaks.

Du Wan makes this point clearly in the introduction to his *Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest*:

> The purest energy of the heaven-earth world coalesces into rock. It emerges, bearing the soil. Its formations are wonderful and fantastic . . . Within the size of a fist can be assembled the beauty of a thousand cliffs.[30]

The idea that miniaturization loses none of the power of the original—and may even increase it—is prevalent in a number of East Asian traditions, as exemplified in the practices of collecting Chinese scholars' stones, Japanese bonsai, or container gardens.[31]

An entry on stone in an eighteenth-century encyclopedia, eighty-six pages long, characterizes rocks as follows:

> The essential energy of earth forms rock . . . Rocks are kernels of energy; the generation of rock from energy is like the body's arterial system producing nails and teeth . . . The earth has the famous mountains as its support . . . rocks are its bones.[32]

In China it's all a matter of the way *qi* energies work: size matters, but only relatively.

The Chinese are traditionally given to what has been called "correlative thinking," in which the foremost correlation is that between macrocosm and microcosm. Thus the garden or park of an emperor would represent on a smaller scale the world, All-under-Heaven, over which the emperor as "Son of Heaven" reigned. And a rock in a garden would similarly stand in for a mountain, though it has to be appropriately placed. When rocks are integrated into the field of energies that is the well-designed garden, their *qi* energies are intensified. As Ji Cheng puts it: "Rocks are not like plants or trees: after they have been collected and set in a garden, they gain a new lease on life."[33]

> The most important thing for the garden maker is to learn the inner principles of arranging rocks. Whereas the temperament of flowers and trees is easy to grasp, the inner significance of mountains and forests requires profound study. If you have the real thing within you when you make the imitation, the imitation that you make will become real.[34]

Or, in terms of energy, it's again a matter of getting that resonance going.

But the best-known and most characteristic rocks in classical Chinese gardens don't look much like mountains at all, but rather resemble organic forms. These are the famous Taihu rocks, so called because they come from Lake Tai ("Great Lake") near Suzhou. The geology of the area is remarkable in that the rock there is formed from limestone deposits nearly 300 million

FIGURE 14.5: Taihu rock. Photo by the author.

years old.[35] These ancient formations were corroded into extravagant shapes when the area was covered by sea, and were subsequently worked and sculpted by the action of hard pebbles on the bed of the lake during storms. In later times people would put rocks that they had taken from the lake bed back into the lake, so that they could be naturally "polished," and would then "harvest" them again years later.

Especially fine specimens of these Taihu rocks—which can look like frozen billows of sea spume, enormous stone fungi burgeoning into the air, or extravagant coral formations poised in an invisible ocean—often stand alone as the centerpieces of famous gardens. No wonder they look so zoomorphic: long ago they *were* living beings. Limestone comes from sediment on the bottom of ancient oceans, from shells and skeletons of

marine organisms, corals and molluscs and algae. As a configuration of *qi* energy, the rock is thus an event rather than a thing, playing out on a vastly extended time scale. (Rocks around 300 million years old—and we look at them for only a minute or two?) Do we see ourselves in them, sensing our common ancestry long ago? And how do the human body's minerals react to the presence of limestone?

The earliest description we have of a Taihu rock, which became the most highly prized kind in China during the Tang dynasty, comes from a poem by Bai Juyi.

> Its controlling spirit overpowers the bamboo and trees,
> Its manifested energy dominates the pavilions and terrace.
> From its interior rise quiet whispers,
> Is it the womb of the winds?
> Sharp swords show in its angular edges,
> Their ringing resonance clearer than jasper chimes.
> Its great shape seems to move,
> Its massive forces seem on the brink of collapse.[36]

After centuries of rock connoisseurship, the beauty of Great Lake rocks came to be judged by four main criteria, designated by the conveniently rhyming terms: *shou*, *zhou*, *lou*, and *tou*.

Shou is "leanness," which means that the rock should be without any kind of "fat" or excrescences that would obscure the expression of its internal structure or energy. This suggests that a slender rock is better than a plump one, that there should be no unnecessary excrescences, such that the form displays the configuration of *qi* energies that gave it shape.

Zhou refers to a rich surface texture, consisting of wrinkles and other patterns. These lend the rock a sense of movement, especially if water-reflected light plays upon it, or bamboo-cast shadows. Again one should be able to read from the surface of the rock the kinds of forces that formed it.

Lou means channels and indentations, which induce the eye to move within and around the stone in multiple ways and various rhythms, so as to get the feel of its flow. These also lend the rock a certain lightness.

Tou refers to a foraminate structure with holes and openings. To the Chinese sensibility, a rock that is one hundred percent present is perhaps too obvious, while one that is only three quarters there is more interesting. Foraminate structure was prized for being expressive of the transformations that make up the world as a whole and the interplay between void and form. Ji Cheng quotes this line from the Buddhist poet and painter of the Tang

dynasty, Wang Wei: "The prospect of the mountains lies between something and nothing."[37]

There is influence here from Daoism as well as Buddhism, the idea that the world is an interplay of something and nothing, absence and presence, fullness and emptiness. A famous chapter (11) in the *Laozi* uses several examples—the round hole at the center of a wheel, the emptiness inside a pot, the windows and doors in a wall—to draw attention to the way an absence within presence can make something useful. And in the case of rock, more interesting aesthetically.

These criteria suggest that *lightness* is a desirable quality, that the rock's appearance should contrast with its massive weight. Some Taihu rocks look like clouds, just as some mountains depicted in Chinese landscape paintings resemble heaps of cumulus cloud. Rocks in Japanese gardens by contrast generally advertise rather than conceal their weight, though their placement is often designed to exhibit their vitality in the way they thrust up from beneath the ground.

MOUNTAINS OF ROCKS

If a rock is a microcosm of a mountain, then an appropriately arranged and constructed collection of rocks will form an entire mountain range. And if a suitably shaped rock is an especially efficient conduit for *qi*, then a collection of such rocks, appropriately arranged, will constitute an even more powerful configuration. Thus one of the earliest practices in Chinese garden making was the construction of *jiashan*, or "artificial mountains," which were the precursors of the rockeries for which Chinese gardens are renowned (and eighteenth-century English gardens after them).

The Emperor Huizong built several artificial mountains in his imperial park, among them the apotheosis of the genre. It was an enormous mountain of rocks, with "ten thousand layered peaks," which rose to a height of seventy-five meters. It comprised "ranges, cliffs, deep gullies, escarpments and chasms," as well as a precipice of purple rock. In one place boulders had been artfully placed as if spontaneously rolled there by mountain streams: "They were all in various strange shapes, like tusks, horns, mouths, noses, heads, tails, and claws. They seemed to be angry and protesting against each other."[38] Huizong clearly appreciated and delighted in the animate activity of rocks. What fascinates about such stone is the way natural processes sculpt the apparently least animate form of being into the shapes of more complex forms such as animals and human beings.

The enduring significance of the artificial mountain is attested by Ji Cheng, who spends more time discussing it than any other feature of the garden.

Because it's so much larger than a single rock, which one contemplates from many angles but without moving too much, the artificial mountain enables a fuller body experience.

> As you wander wherever your feet take you, you may doubt that there is any boundary to the place. As you raise your head to gaze around, deep emotions will be stirred in you . . . The depths of your imagination should be full of images, and your feelings should overflow into valleys and hills.[39]

Corresponding to the paths that lead through real mountains are walkways leading through the built ones that let the viewer experience the energies of the structure from a quasi-subterranean perspective within the "mountain."

We encountered earlier the "miniature mountain" at the entrance of the garden depicted in *The Story of the Stone*—a text that some may regard as reliable on this topic because the whole book is narrated by a talking stone. (This particular stone is actively animate, capable of changing size and shape, and also of moving around.) A later passage in the novel describes "a miniature mountain of rock, whose many holes and fissures, worn through it by weathering or the wash of waters, bestowed on it a misleading appearance of fragile delicacy."[40] Those aesthetic criteria for Taihu rocks definitely lean toward the light and airy—as with the Gothic cathedral, where the aim is likewise to counteract the weight of the stone by lending it (often through foraminate structure) the appearance of lightness.

Ji Cheng recommends that the rocks forming the peaks of artificial mountains should be larger at the top than below, and fitted together so that "they will have the appearance of being about to soar into the air."[41] And here are some explicit instructions from Shen Fu:

> To make a miniature mountain, pile up some dirt, then place rocks on it and plant flowers and grass here and there. The fence in front of it should be of plum trees, and the wall behind it should be covered with vines, so that it will look like a mountain even though there is no mountain there.[42]

There you have it: by playing with scale you get that "illusion in the reality."

THE GARDEN AS TONIC

I mentioned at the beginning that the functions of the Chinese garden go beyond the provision of an aesthetic environment to other purposes, such as the restoration of one's vital energies. This is a large topic, but let me conclude with just a few remarks on it.

The early development of the practice of *fengshui* in China often took advantage of people's susceptibility to superstition, so that a good part of it became tainted with charlatanry. (*Fengshui*—literally "winds waters"—is often translated as "geomancy.") But once you strip away the layers of mystification that often surround the practice, you are left with an eminently sensible and practical form of environmental science.

The basic idea is that flows of *qi* through the earth, along with the energies of winds and waters, are what shape the land into different kinds of terrain and landscape. Just as *qi* flows through the human body along what Chinese acupuncture calls "meridians," so an expert in *fengshui* can chart the flows of energy through the earth along what are called "earth-veins" (*dimo*) or "lifelines" (*shi*).[43] A basic premise of *fengshui* thinking—and one that also underlies the development of the Chinese garden—is this: that since the human body is a configuration of the same kinds of energies that course through the natural environment, one's activities will be enhanced to the extent that one harmonizes the patterns of *qi* flowing through the body with the energetic configurations of the places in which one lives, works, eats, and sleeps.

When the Chinese build a garden, the point is to create an environment where the configurations of *qi* will have a restorative and invigorating effect on the mental and physical well-being of the people in it. Rocks of unusual size or shape tend to be special conduits or reservoirs for *qi* energies, and since the human body is understood as a different configuration of the same energies, it is reasonable to assume that beneficial effects will flow from simply being in the presence of such rocks. The rock garden thereby becomes a site not only for aesthetic contemplation but also for self-cultivation and the enhancement of physical health, especially since the *qi* of the rocks will be vitalized by the flows of energy among the other natural components there.

The late Ming dynasty painter Mi Wanzhong was a famous collector of rocks, and according to the account of a contemporary there was one stone that had an especially vitalizing effect on him: "If he was tired, the stone would rouse him; if he was feeling low, it would cheer him up."[44] Rocks and gardens can also exert a tonic effect on perceptions of the world more generally. Insofar as we come to perceive stone as a denser and slower-moving form of the energies that also constitute organic configurations such as plants or animals, this gives us a much livelier world altogether. Such an experiential transformation can also lead to a different and more salutary way of thinking about ecological issues. And finally, spending time with the rocks and mountains of the Chinese garden helps one develop a flexibility of visual experience and reflective thinking that serves to enhance many aspects of daily life.

Let me close with some lines from an unexpected source: the great John Moriarty, a poet-philosopher from Ireland. Musing on the news that in Chinese nouns are also verbs, he wrote this:

> A speaker of English, when I see a rock I see a thing. Guo Xi, a speaker of Chinese, sees it as an event, or better, as an eventing, as a happening, as an action, and that might be one reason why he also painted mountains as though they were clouds . . . A wonderful thing it would be if Guo Xi's painting called *Early Spring* were to come to Europe. It would recreate our eyes and minds. It would *liberate rocks from our Medousa perceptions of them*.[45]

It would indeed. And this is just what we learn from the role of rock in the Chinese garden. Liberate rock! Free stone! Keep an open mind.

NOTES

1. Tu Weiming, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature," in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (eds.), *Confucianism and Ecology*: *The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 108.
2. Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1968).
3. *Mencius*, 2A:2.
4. Zhuangzi, *The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), chs. 19 and 22 (pp. 69, 86).
5. Liu An, *The Huainanzi* 3.1, trans. John S. Major et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 114–15.
6. A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, Ill: Open Court, 1989), p. 328.
7. Aetius, in G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 158; Hippolytus, in Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 145. See Graham, *Disputers*, p. 356.
8. Cited in R. Stewart Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China: A Study and Analysis of the Spatial Design of the Chinese Private Garden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 89.
9. This version of the myth comes from the third great classic of philosophical Daoism, the *Book of Liezi*, ch. 5, "The Questions of Tang."
10. From *The Record of Hua Yang Palace* by the monk Zixui, cited in Maggie Keswick, *The Chinese Garden: History, Art and Architecture* (Cambridge. Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 65–66.
11. The painting and a commentary can be seen on the website of the Palace Museum in Beijing (https://en.dpm.org.cn/collections/collections/2013-01-24/1207.html).

12. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens* (1631), trans. Alison Hardie (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 110.
13. Ibid., p. 53
14. Ibid., p. 47.
15. Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone* (1750), vol. 1, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 328.
16. Confucius, *Analects* 6.23.
17. Du Fu, cited in William Hung, *Tu Fu: China's Greatest Poet* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), p. 169.
18. Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), Part II: "The Pleasures of Leisure."
19. Ibid..
20. James Cahill's translation of Xie He, cited in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 12. See also Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Translations and Comments* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), pp. 18–24.
21. See Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, "The Vital Spirit," pp. 94–6.
22. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 108.
23. Ibid.
24. William Chambers, *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (London, 1773), p. 70.
25. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 109, p. 93.
26. John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute in America, 1985), p. 173.
27. Pierre Rambach and Suzanne Rambach, *Gardens of Longevity in China and Japan: The Art of the Stone Raisers*, trans. André Marling (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), pp. 26–29.
28. On sympathetic resonance, see the *Huainanzi*, ch. 6; also *Zhuangzi*, ch. 24 (p. 103).
29. Rambach and Rambach, *Gardens of Longevity*, p. 39.
30. Edward H. Schafer, *Tu Wan's Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), cited in Hay, *Kernels of Energy*, p. 38.
31. See Rolf Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) for a fascinating account of the power of miniaturisation. Also Stephen Little, *Spirit Stones of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1999).
32. From *The Classical Contents of the Mirror of Profound Depths*, cited in Hay, *Kernels of Energy,* p. 52.
33. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 112.
34. Ibid., p. 107.
35. Hay, *Kernels of Energy*, p. 36.
36. Cited in Hay, *Kernels of Energy,* pp. 19–21.

37. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 55.
38. Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, pp. 53–55.
39. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 106.
40. Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, chs. 1, 17.
41. Ji Cheng, *The Craft of Gardens*, p. 110.
42. Shen Fu, *Six Records of a Floating Life*, pp. 60, 55, 60.
43. See François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1999), ch. 5.
44. Little, *Spirit Stones of China*, p. 24.
45. John Moriarty, in Michael W. Higgins (ed.), *Introducing John Moriarty: In His Own Words* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2019), p. 127, emphasis added.

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