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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59d0d283>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(13)

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Publication Date

2014-12-01

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Civil War, Revolutionary Heritage, and the Chinese Garden

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Abstract

The Chinese garden now symbolizes timeless national, cultural, and aesthetic values. But as real property in the past, gardens inevitably were subject to the vicissitudes of their times. This article focuses on gardens and the Taiping Civil War (1851–1864). During the war, many gardens were reduced to tile shards and ash. Surviving gardens functioned as objects of longing and nostalgia, sites of refuge (physical and emotional), or a means to display status under the new regime. In the postwar period, gardens served as status symbols, places to commemorate loss or celebrate restoration, and venues for renewed sociability. This article uses a series of case studies to explore the multiple meanings associated with gardens, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and the Qing dynasty—in the past and today.

Keywords: Chinese gardens, Suzhou, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Qing dynasty, Nanjing, cultural heritage, tourism

This article explores the tangled and fraught relationship between contemporary China and its imperial and revolutionary pasts by considering the past and present significance of gardens and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Gardens today serve as nodes in a commoditized tourist experience emphasizing luxury and entertainment, and also as sites for the production and representation of professed Chinese cultural essence. Gardens, presented as timeless, aestheticized, and harmonious spaces, also serve to occlude past violence, conflict, and change. They function as a form of cultural heritage, a national resource to be deployed by the Chinese Communist Party in its pursuit of postsocialist legitimacy and by local officials keen to capitalize on local cultural resources to attract the booming market in domestic tourism.¹ The past of “cultural heritage” embodied in gardens has displaced a prior past of “revolutionary heritage,” featuring glorious but ultimately unsuccessful antecedents such as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement. The heroic narrative of China’s post–Opium War and

prerevolutionary modern history (1838–1945), including the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, remains hegemonic in settings such as middle school and college textbooks (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2006). It has, however, lost relevance in other contexts, with celebratory imaginings of luxurious and leisured cultural heritage, often linked to emperors and elites, taking precedence. Not only do these cheerful reconstructions obscure the revolutionary past, but they also elevate artifacts such as gardens to a position outside historical time, obscuring the damage wrought by violent and destructive events.²



Figure 1. Zhan yuan, Nanjing. All photos in this article were taken by the author in June 2013.

“The Chinese garden” has become a cultural signifier for our times—a mostly harmless and ostensibly timeless artifact standing for a civilization that seemingly loves nature and celebrates beauty and refinement (figure 1). But that image has a history, even as it masks the impact of historical events on actual gardens. The Chinese garden first became a celebrated transnational icon in the context of early modern globalization when eighteenth-century Jesuits explained Chinese difference through architecture and art and wealthy Europeans built chinoiserie fantasies in parks and estates. Then, the garden stood for China’s sophistication, exoticism, wealth, and cultural refinement. Within China, architects and architectural historians

in the early twentieth century took an interest in the garden as an expression of national cultural heritage—perhaps not coincidentally, one that had been appreciated and thus validated by cultures outside China. In this early twentieth-century context, too, the garden was associated with wealth and cultural sophistication—as well as literary refinement and cosmological meaning (Hardie 2003). Gardens thus came to be imagined as “key sites of ‘Chineseness,’” both in China and in the West (Clunas 1996, 12).³ After the Chinese revolution in 1949 and until the period of reform and opening up, the imperative to overturn and repudiate the feudal past meant that the Chinese garden, whether as artifact or ideal, with its overtones of exclusive elite leisure, languished in relative obscurity within China. The remnants of surviving residential gardens were enclosed within work units or put to other purposes. During the second half of the twentieth century, revolutionary heritage, rather than Chinese cultural heritage, constituted the relevant past for the Communist Party’s utopian vision of the national future.

For a constellation of reasons, the building of refined scholars’ gardens has been reignited with a burst of new construction both in China and abroad since the turn of the twenty-first century. And again, in this current moment, gardens stand as a symbol for Chinese cultural essence, a suitable and highly marketable past for present-day national and local aspirations. For example: gardens have been “restored” (in many cases, from the ground up) as tourist sites in Nanjing, Yangzhou, and elsewhere—even as “authentic” Suzhou gardens have been built on Staten Island (1999), at the Huntington Library in Los Angeles (2008), in Portland, Oregon (2000), and, in the planning and fundraising stages, at the National Arboretum in Washington, DC. Abroad, recently constructed gardens celebrate tradition, authenticity, Chinese culture, and international cooperation.⁴ In China, new gardens signify prosperity, refinement, antiquity, and the patronage of culture by the state. Such gardens, whether in China or overseas, provide a venue for leisure tourism and a point of entry to an exotic and timeless world of seasonal, numerological, and cultural associations packaged and presented in colorful photo books and pamphlets.⁵ In China, these celebratory constructions (physical and cultural) of gardens as sunny sites of elite and imperial sociability are also the objects of state patronage and represent in the present the marriage of state-sponsored values, such as national unity and glorious cultural heritage, and a marketplace in search of authentically Chinese modes of leisure and aesthetic consumption.

There are other, darker, more historically sensitive ways of considering Chinese gardens. These interpretations have largely disappeared behind insistent imagery of “authentic” and “refined” scholars’ gardens embodying “natural harmony,” usually portrayed as being in the “Ming” style. Real gardens were real places with histories; they existed in time—and thus suffered troubled times. They were, as art historian Craig Clunas reminds us in his masterful book on Ming gardens, real property with real functions and—by extension—real vulnerability to the vicissitudes of the real estate market, fluctuations in the fortunes of their owners, and violence in war (Clunas 1996, 15).⁶ They could be productive spaces or explosive commodities in the context of family conflict over inheritance. They could be sold in times of dearth, fall to ruin in times of neglect, or be confiscated by the government in times of bankruptcy (Li and Feng, 1882, 47:12b). They could be seized, looted, or destroyed in times of war. Gardens were sites of beauty and leisure enjoyment, but they also could be sites of loss, forgetting, and remembrance. The garden as lived experience and owned property thus encoded a broader range of meanings before its appropriation as an exotic symbol of China on the world stage, or its deployment as a sign of wealth and leisure consumption associated with literati and imperial pleasures in China today. Indeed, most of the gardens we see in China today are recent reproductions—evocations of a richly imagined past—on sites associated with gardens destroyed in or since the conflagration of the mid-nineteenth-century civil war known in China as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement.

This article first considers gardens in the unhappy context of the Taiping Rebellion, China’s mid-nineteenth-century civil war—which wrought havoc in China’s most heavily gardened region. The damage associated with the Taiping Rebellion has remained largely forgotten, first overwritten by a narrative of revolutionary progress and then ignored in favor of nostalgia for eighteenth-century splendors. Over the course of the twentieth century, the Taiping Civil War was celebrated as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement, a glorious antecedent to twentieth-century revolution, and thus it was enshrined architecturally as a site of state-sponsored memory in key locations including the Monument to the People’s Heroes on Tiananmen Square in Beijing and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum in Nanjing. It also inspired a vast and laudatory historiography, highlighting first parallels to revolutionary ideals, including land reform and women’s liberation, and later (in the post-Mao era) state-sponsored values such as modernization and opening up to the outside world. Now this

past seems less relevant to a party that celebrates Confucius and honors the glorious achievements of the Qianlong emperor in sites dedicated to luxurious consumption. The article concludes with a discussion of “the Chinese garden” in the twenty-first century—as site for the production of a newly suitable and easily consumable past for the Chinese party-state—and the literal displacement of the Taiping past as site of national memory.

Destruction

The Taiping War (1851–1864) ripped apart the Lower Yangzi delta, ruining renowned cities like Suzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuxi (among others). Not surprisingly, many famous gardens were reduced to rubble. In various genres, contemporaries commented on the damage to elite residences, libraries, Confucian academies, shrines, temples, and their associated gardens. They tallied lost property and commented on the destruction of scenic sites, even as they documented and honored lost relatives and mourned or sought to resurrect a lost society. In this trying context, gardens could, on a symbolic level, serve as richly imagined sites of loss and remembrance for their elite owners. More concretely, they also were objects of real property—either occupied and put to new use, or reduced to ruins.

The Taiping Rebellion often has been called the bloodiest civil war in human history. Missionary observers at the time estimated twenty to thirty million dead, including civilians, and although we have no way of assessing the accuracy of these numbers, it is clear that the carnage was considerable and possibly unprecedented. Over a period of approximately fourteen years, the fighting afflicted seventeen of Qing dynasty China’s twenty-four provinces. In its final years, the war was especially destructive in the Yangzi River valley, the empire’s cultural and economic heartland and, not coincidentally, the region most famous for gardens.

Inspired by a Christian-derived religion and an antidynastic mission, the rebels specifically targeted temples, administrative offices, and academies for destruction. Because many such institutions had attached gardens, a significant number of gardens were destroyed. The troops fighting for the Qing caused indiscriminate havoc; they frequently deployed fire as a weapon, burning civilian homes as they defended or reconquered Jiangnan cities. As a result, a significant number of residential gardens also were destroyed by Qing forces, or changed hands as a result of the fighting. The postwar Suzhou gazetteer estimated that fewer than one in ten of the city’s residential gardens survived Taiping occupation and the Qing reconquest (Li and Feng

1882, 45:1a).⁷ To cite but a few specific examples from various parts of the region: Hua Yilun recalled his loss of more than sixty buildings, including a private library near Wuxi—specifically blaming Qing forces for the damage (Hua n.d.).⁸ The Unadorned Garden (Pu yuan), a rural retreat in Yangzhou Prefecture that had been built at great expense in the early nineteenth century and featured exotic plants and rocks shipped in from distant places, was reduced to rubble in the fighting. Only toppling walls and desolate paths remained (Yingjie, Yan, and Fang 1874, 5:29b–30a). Some properties, like Suzhou’s Wading-in-Water Garden (She yuan), passed to new owners and were renamed as a result of the war.⁹ Other gardens suffered more lasting damage. The garden property in Nanjing once owned by the eighteenth-century poet and bon vivant Yuan Mei (1716–1797) had been famous for its hills and ponds as well as for its lavish literary gatherings. As a result of food shortages in their capital, the Taiping forces ordered the hills flattened and the lakes filled in in order to create rice paddies to provision their regime. With reconquest, shed people (*pengmin*) moved in, opened the land, and planted grain; “the dirt piled up higher and higher” (Hu 1926, 9:1a), and soon the traces of the garden could not be recovered even with the help of a map.¹⁰

In spite of this general atmosphere of destruction, suffering, and mayhem, diary evidence suggests that at least some individuals continued to enjoy leisure gatherings in gardens even during the war (Jin C. 1863). Moreover, gardens continued to serve as status symbols during the war—even, or especially, for those who served the rebel regime. Indeed, in spite of their radical anti-Qing stance, the Taiping leadership adopted many of the accoutrements of prestige associated with dynastic rule, including garden residences for ruling elites. Taiping leaders occupied and repurposed historic gardens, using them as palaces to capitalize on their prestige value. Several historically significant gardens survived the war because they had been converted to Taiping princely mansions. Other properties survived the war as princely mansions only to be destroyed in the Qing reconquest. Gardens converted to use by the Taiping nobility often acquired distinctive new decorative features, including painted murals; these are now collected and featured at the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Historical Museum in Nanjing as rare and treasured examples of popular art from the period. One garden that survived the war in this way was the Humble Administrator’s Garden (Zhuozheng yuan) in Suzhou, which was converted into a Taiping princely palace (Jin and Yi 2003, 133). After the Qing reconquest, the garden was used as a temporary home for the provincial administrator’s offices. Later, it was carved up and used

for various other purposes (Li and Feng 1882, 46:10a). The garden one sees in Suzhou today is a partial (mostly twentieth-century) replica based on an impression of what may have been there in the Ming (Zhang 2007, 100).

War also posed threats to gardens for reasons other than violence: the scarcity of firewood in Jiangnan cities during the war meant that trees and plants from gardens and temples—and even broken furniture and wood ripped from buildings—had to be used for cooking and heating in order for people to stay alive (Zhang 2007, 74–75). Many people, of course, did not survive. And those who returned to Jiangnan cities after the war found waterways, canals, and roads clogged with human remains, as well as wrecked gardens and homes. In this regard, we can see the loss of gardens as emblematic of the loss of a way of life and even as a metaphor for the loss of relatives, friends, or the prewar self among friends and relations.

In the decade after the war, writers bemoaned the destruction of famous gardens and scenic sites as one mark of what had changed as a result of the war. Recalling a visit to the famous sights of West Lake in Hangzhou some seven years after the end of the war, the well-known scholar, official, and writer Yu Yue (1821–1907) observed that

since the military catastrophe [i.e., the Taiping War], the famous sights are mostly overgrown and in ruins. Only [several shrines and three scenic sites—which he names] have been repaired somewhat for leisure touring. But west of the Six Bridges, there is nothing to tour. I went alone in a small boat to the third bridge inside Su Dike, and within the inner lake, I went to Mao jia bu. I went further in to Jade Belt Bridge and visited the site of the Guandi Temple at Golden Sand Harbor. But it was all overgrown and completely unrecognizable.... The land around it was completely overgrown and there was nothing to be visited that could inspire poetry. There were three rooms standing, but they too were about to collapse. If one were to repair them to prevent them from falling down, that would be at least a partial achievement, but no one has thought of it. Looking back to 1836 when I first came here, it is only thirty-five years separating then from now. One cannot help feeling the difference between past and present! (Yu 1984, 30)

In addition to the scenic sites around the lake, many famous gardens in Hangzhou, including several at least nominally dating back to the Ming, had been badly damaged or destroyed in the war. The ruin of beautiful places was a material reminder of what had been destroyed during the war—and thus of the differences between present and past.

The destruction of gardens forcefully marked change over time. In Yangzhou, once the Qing empire's premier city for gardens, the Taiping War marked an emphatic end to the city's glorious past: gradual decline in the early nineteenth century was followed by utter decimation

from which the city failed to recover.¹¹ As salt monopoly official Jin Anqing (1817–1880) noted, the city’s famous sights had all been gardens and pavilions, and although these were not natural features, they were unique and of extraordinary craftsmanship. Indeed, it was the very fact that they had been manufactured that made them so extraordinary. He observed that without the “concentrated material wealth and human talents of the Qianlong reign (1736–1796), none of this would have been easy to achieve.” By the early nineteenth century, Yangzhou’s gardens had already begun to fall into ruin. Only about half of the gardens were still extant. Those remaining gardens, however, were still gorgeous. When Jin visited in 1838, he found many more of the city’s gardens overgrown with grass. He concluded his account by noting: “The Southern [i.e., Taiping] rebels wrought havoc here, and destroyed all of the famous sites” (Jin A. 1997, 46–47). The glory days of the early nineteenth century—let alone the splendors of the eighteenth—would be hard to recapture.

Similar descriptions obtain even in smaller, less famous places. Prior to the war, small towns across the Yangzi delta region had enjoyed a renaissance in garden construction. These gardens were a mark of the towns’ new prosperity and influence, as were the local publications that recorded their growth and later decline. As in the major cities, war meant the destruction or loss of gardens and built heritage in market towns. For example, gardens in the town of Nanxun burned down during the war. After the war, ownership of the properties passed to different families. By contrast, properties that survived the war were considered notable for having been left standing. One such garden, located in a town near Shanghai, was the only one remaining when all the other gardens and residences in that town had been destroyed. Although some of these small-town gardens were restored after the war, and indeed new gardens and even new towns were built, the new construction seems to have been on a smaller scale and took place in a substantially altered social environment (Wu 2007, 82–84).

With its many temples, administrative offices, scenic sites, and wealthy residences, the city of Suzhou boasted a significant number of gardens before the war. Few of these survived. A memoirist, Ke Wuchi, recorded that not even a single shard of tile remained of the buildings just outside the city’s walls, and that the entire west side of the city had been obliterated while about half of the structures on the east side had been destroyed. He further described the total loss of the city’s famous and scenic sites and the burning of its renowned music pavilions. All of the city’s former administrative offices were reduced to rubble, and only those gardens that had been

converted to Taiping palaces remained standing, conspicuous for their gaudiness among the ruins (Ke 1959, 98).¹² The famous scholar Feng Guifen (1809–1874) mourned the destruction in his hometown, writing that “immediately after the war, the multitude of splendid sights of my home county were all destroyed and reduced to ashes.” (Feng 1981, 3:2a). In the context of extraordinary material devastation, the garden became emblematic (at least for some elite men) of a past golden age. In the context of postwar reconstruction, gardens acquired new meanings as sites for personal and collective commemoration, even as they continued to signal wealth, leisure, status, and sociability.

Reconstruction and Remembrance

After the war, the building or rebuilding (or repurposing) of gardens signaled recovery—whether real or merely desired. Moreover, in the postwar context, the hierarchy of important gardens shifted, as did the hierarchy of scenic cities. Gardens that had enjoyed renown before the war either were in ruins or, having survived the war, were divided and put to new purposes. In some cases, the reconstruction of gardens and scenic sites felt partial, or highlighted, in the effort and incompleteness of the results, what had been lost in the fighting. At Nanjing, which had been the rebel capital and which had suffered terrible devastation in the reconquest, the famous pleasure boats along the Qinhuai waterfront had all been damaged or destroyed. The first postwar governor-general, Zeng Guofan, ordered that two decrepit boats be made into pleasure craft to carry tourists. Poets praised this as a mark of restoration—music had returned to the pleasure quarters—but perhaps there is a certain amount of pathos in the contrast between what had been lost and the paltry pleasures of the present? (Gong 1987–1989).¹³

After the war, people wrote memoirs and essays describing lost gardens; others built gardens in which to mourn family members whom they had lost. Still others built gardens as settings in which to forget the horrors that they had witnessed and to reward themselves for their staunch resistance to the Taiping.¹⁴ Yet others returned to gardens to dispose of corpses that had been hastily buried on their grounds. For example, Tang Yusheng, the owner of the Poetry Grotto (Shi zhi ku) in Nanjing, committed suicide by jumping into a pond in his garden during the war. He was buried in haste, with wisteria vines to mark the site. After the war ended, he was exhumed for reburial in a proper tomb. Those involved in the reburial found that the vines had surrounded his corpse like a coffin. This was termed a “wonder,” or “miracle” (Hu 1926, 9:1a).

Suzhou's renowned garden district around Tiger Hill retained traces of its former glory after the war, and tourists continued to visit. Moreover, because of its proximity to the rising urban center of Shanghai, Suzhou enjoyed a reputation as a congenial place for wealthy and powerful retirees, whose presence fueled a postwar garden construction boom, although many historically famous gardens remained in disrepair (Zhang 2007, 62, 100–101). Some of these new gardens were open to visitors, who purchased tickets in order to tour them (Zhang 2007, 62). In the early twentieth century, a new train line linking Suzhou to Shanghai made Suzhou a highly sought-after destination, and the gardens (new and reconstructed) became a major attraction. This relatively late development seems to account at least in part for Suzhou's current reputation as China's foremost garden city: it was marketed as a place to reconnect with classical leisure traditions—especially gardens—to tourists from the region's new center, the treaty port of Shanghai.¹⁵ By contrast, Yangzhou, which arguably was more famous for its gardens than Suzhou during the eighteenth century, did not recover from the war due to its relative isolation, although a few rich merchants built gardens there.¹⁶ With the construction of a railroad spur and a Yangzi bridge during the presidency of native son Jiang Zemin, tourism—and thus garden construction—has restarted again in earnest in the twenty-first century. Ironically, the Wikipedia entry on Yangzhou describes the city as being “famous for its many well preserved Suzhou-style gardens”; during the Qing, of course, the city was famous for its many famous Yangzhou-style gardens.¹⁷ The notion that “the “classical Chinese garden” must be Suzhou-style is in fact a relatively recent one, which may well have been a consequence of wartime destruction and the long decline of competing cities such as Yangzhou.

Ruined gardens symbolized what had been lost during the war: an idealized world of cultured leisure, gatherings with now-lost friends and relatives. Remembered gardens and garden gatherings afforded emotional solace to those who had experienced the end of the world as they had known it. Colored by memory, the garden as site for elite leisure gatherings was a touchstone for what had been lost in war, a site for remembering lost friends and loved ones and lost property. Li Zhaozeng (1823–1877), a native of Yangzhou who had served elsewhere as a county magistrate, commissioned a painting of the Garden of Motherly Love (*Ci yuan*), a garden that his family had owned and lost as a result of the war. In an essay about the painting, Li explains that the garden had been located at the intersection of two canals in the western suburbs of Yangzhou; it had been close to Slender West Lake and the famous temples and gardens there. Although the

garden was small, it had an excellent assortment of trees and plants: fragrant osmanthus, plum, peach, bamboo, and most notably two ancient ginkgo trees, visible from the nearby lake and thus an emblem of the garden's prestige and ownership.

Li recalls in his essay how his family came to own the Garden of Motherly Love: his mother had heard of its beauty and coveted it. His elder brother purchased it and gave it to her as an act of filial piety just a few years prior to the start of the war. When the flowers were blooming or on moonlit nights, the brother toasted their mother and wished her longevity, which pleased her to no end. He also invited guests to visit the garden and to compose poetry, arrange flowers, and drink wine together in the peace and quiet on the outskirts of the walled city. Only two years later, the city fell at the hands of the Southern rebels (Yue fei). The family fled and thereby avoided harm, living for some years as refugees without a fixed residence. The garden, however, was totally destroyed. Li's brother and mother mourned its loss; its destruction marked an end to a brief but pleasant period in their lives. Li notes that in the eighteenth century, Yangzhou had boasted the best gardens in the empire, their splendor enhanced by the imperial southern tours. By the early nineteenth century, these gardens had already entered decline. The burning and pillaging of the war completely obliterated the few gardens that remained, and of the city's most famous gardens, "not one pillar survived." The Garden of Motherly Love had been small, perhaps inferior to other, more renowned gardens. Its importance lay in the joy Li's mother had known there and the filial piety his brother expressed in acquiring it. Li reflects in his essay on the lost garden, noting that his brother has since died and his mother is growing old. He himself lacks the means to replace the garden—he can only commission a painting of it.

From the vantage point of this less pleasing present, the remembered garden and its painted image serve as a prism through which Li looks back nostalgically on happier times with his brother, days that "are long gone and cannot be brought back." He compares himself to Yu Xin (513–581), a man from the ancient past who, like him, had suffered chaos and was unable to return home. Yu had written a poem about his lost garden to capture his feelings of longing for a lost time and place. Li ends his essay by explaining that, burdened with similar feelings of longing, he had commissioned a painter to create a "picture to house my emotions." And indeed, the Garden of Motherly Love became, in its absence, a site of personal memory, its painted double serving as a repository for reflections on happier times and sundered family ties (Li Z. 2011, 45–46).

In the postwar period, gardens sometimes served as sites in which to reencounter and commemorate the dead. These rites could be highly personal, as we can see in the case of the Martyr's Garden (Lie yuan), built by Zhang Guanglie of Hangzhou. As a small child, Zhang had witnessed the murder of his mother by a Taiping soldier, and he spent the remainder of his life trying to find an appropriate way to remember her. He specifically asserts that his garden (unlike other people's gardens) was no mere status symbol intended for banquets and leisure amusements. Instead, it was a place, analogous to his person, dedicated to the memory of his mother.¹⁸ In the Martyr's Garden, Zhang Guanglie composed poetry in his mother's honor and hoped to encounter her departed spirit. He documents specific sites in the garden where he felt her presence. Ultimately, he was forced to give up his garden due to financial difficulties: he seems to have lost control of it in a dispute with his mother's relatives. As real property, in the real world, the garden also was subject to the vicissitudes of family conflict and Zhang Guanglie's ability (or inability) to sustain it. But as long as he had access to the garden, it provided a venue for the highly personal commemorative activities of a bereaved son.

In addition to individual mourning, gardens also could provide venues for the formal, sometimes state-sanctioned, usually elite organized commemoration of the war dead. Shrines honoring the war dead, individually or collectively, were in many instances constructed on sites associated with gardens. For example, in Suzhou Prefecture, the former site of the Consult-the-Recluse Garden (Qia yin yuan) was rebuilt and renamed after the Anhui Army recaptured the city, ending the period of Taiping occupation. The new garden housed the Anhui Guildhall (Anhui huiguan), a Manifest Loyalty Shrine dedicated to the Anhui Army dead (Huai jun Zhaozhong ci), and a shrine honoring Cheng Xueqi (1829–1864), a former Taiping general who had switched sides and died as an Anhui Army officer retaking Suzhou for the Qing (Li and Feng 1882, 46:26a).¹⁹ The property, renamed the Garden of Orchid Shadow (Hui yin yuan) was later expanded to include new garden features, presumably for the enjoyment of Anhui natives resident in Suzhou. Not surprisingly, this project was carried out with the patronage of Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), an Anhui Army general and the postwar governor of Jiangsu.

Because commemorative shrines honoring the war dead were in many instances sited in gardens and organized and operated by semiofficial bureaus staffed by local elite philanthropists, they also provided a context for elite sociability and organization as well as negotiation over construction funds with local officials. Over the course of the Qing, it had become customary for

the state to honor an expanding category of war dead in Manifest Loyalty Shrines, including, by the mid-nineteenth century, civilians who had died resisting rebels and bandits.²⁰ Two adjacent garden properties in the eastern district of Hangzhou, the Garden of One Who is Filial Like Gao Yu (Gao yuan, or “Gao Garden”) and Governor Jin’s Estate (Jin ya zhuang), provide excellent examples of the role gardens might play in the new forms of elite organization and activism that took shape around commemorative shrines honoring the local war dead in the postwar period.

In Hangzhou, after an extended search, a group of local elites identified the garden known as Governor Jin’s Estate (named after the property’s late Ming owner) as a potential site for a new and expanded Manifest Loyalty Shrine to honor the local dead. One of the attractions of this site was its proximity to—and views of—Gao Garden, with which it shared a complicated history of splendor and subdivision dating back to the late Ming. During the Taiping occupation and Qing reconquest, the neighborhood around these gardens had suffered terrible destruction and both gardens had sustained considerable damage.²¹

After the war ended, four retired officials pooled their resources to repair Governor Jin’s Estate and its grounds as a shared vacation villa; a poem by one of their friends identifies the property they purchased as Gao Garden and traces the site’s long and storied history. The poem narrates the catastrophic effects of the recent war, in which many homes in the neighborhood had gone up in flames. The garden retained its outer wall, but, the poet tells us, old soldiers had stripped pillars and beams to use for cooking fires and trees had been pillaged to repair weapons: “Wailing owls perched on ancient trees and wild foxes howled at the moon from empty corridors” (Xue 1987–1989). The four leisured gentlemen, all accomplished officials of high rank, restored the property, piling rocks and planting trees, dredging waterways, and adding charming bridges. They held poetry parties and, while bare-headed and at leisure, they “forgot about the walking skeletons” of the recent past (Xue 1987–1989). But the bright days of restoration, reconstruction, carefree music, and poetry did not last. The four masters of leisure abandoned the property, and a group of local philanthropists arranged to purchase the garden for the construction of a Manifest Loyalty Shrine. These gentlemen transformed the former site of parties to forget the war into a venue in which to remember the war dead.

The men petitioned for more funds from the provincial government, arguing that they needed to tear down existing buildings, build new ones, and construct bridges, ponds, and corridors. The inclusion of these architectural elements clearly signals that the grounds were still

expected to be garden-like. The men also subsequently acquired the adjacent property, known as Gao Garden. As another poem about the site points out, even as was the case with the garden-turned-shrine, Hangzhou's past as imperial and literati pleasure grounds had been turned to a new and pressing function: honoring the war dead (Meyer-Fong 2013, 159). At the same time, the gardens were also appropriated for a range of less lofty functions: although the site had been rendered sacred by virtue of rituals honoring the war dead, ordinary people treated the grounds as a venue for leisure entertainment and borrowed the buildings as a retreat in which to recover from illnesses. They buried coffins on the grounds, picked flowers, dumped garbage, and used the ponds to raise fish (Meyer-Fong 2013, 161). These activities suggest the range of (unsanctioned) social activities that potentially took place in gardens—and not only during this particular period.

The Cultured Past

The destruction wrought by China's mid-nineteenth-century civil war is, in the twenty-first century, overshadowed by a patriotic narrative of national humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialists and celebrations of China's glorious cultural heritage. Indeed, through reconstruction and strategic storytelling, the damage of the mid-nineteenth century has left few traces in popular memory. Today, tourist sites marry patriotic education with a market-driven imperative to feed nostalgia for "imperial grandeur and cultural authenticity" (Lee 2012, 211). In such settings, the imperial past signifies glory, cultural attainment, wealth, stability, civilization, and national unity—rather than the burden of feudal oppression and national humiliation to be overturned through a future-oriented revolution. Today, the garden experience has been both nationalized and commoditized; it is a celebration of national heritage connected to elite lifestyles that is available to all who can afford the price of an admission ticket. In the present, gardens, often newly built, have lost their nineteenth-century past in favor of the seamless artifice of continuous presence since the Ming or High Qing. As in the past, nominal, rather than physical, continuity provides justification for claims of ancient provenance.

The complicated history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom poses challenges at present. Celebrations of the Taiping as protorevolutionary heroes and anti-imperialist modernizers, a requisite ingredient in the Communist Party's accounts of modern Chinese history, today fit awkwardly alongside newer accounts that privilege a strong center, the cultural prestige of elite

lifestyles, and economic growth. We see this discomfort—and new tourist imperatives—quite literally embodied at the site of Reverence Garden (Zhan yuan) at Nanjing, since 1958 the site of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum. The garden, located near the Confucius Temple and the riverfront pleasure district, was housed on the grounds of the Qing Provincial Administration commissioner’s offices. During the eighteenth century, powerful officials gathered with literary talents to compose poetry there. Paintings, poems, and essays record a veritable who’s who of the age, and, at least in memory, the gatherings and setting described in these sources seem to capture the timeless sun-dappled day of the garden ideal. The Qianlong emperor visited Reverence Garden during his southern tours, bestowed an inscription in his own handwriting, and liked the spot so much that he had a replica made on the grounds of his favorite summer palace in the Beijing suburbs (figure 2). He sought to acquire for his imperial self the literary sociability of the garden ideal.



Figure 2. “Zhan yuan” plaque, attributed to the Qianlong emperor.

But of course Reverence Garden was a real property, and, as such, it existed in real time. In wartime, it served briefly as the palace of the Taiping Eastern King—and then, for a more extended period, as the residence of the wife and child of the deceased Western King. But the garden did not survive the war. Troops loyal to the Qing destroyed it in the paroxysm of violence and devastation that accompanied their reconquest of the Taiping Heavenly Capital in 1864. A stone vessel decorated with dragons, lions, and phoenixes discovered on the site more than a

century later is said to be the only surviving artifact of Taiping manufacture associated with this garden (Jin and Yi 2003).

After the war, Reverence Garden was restored and used again by successive Provincial Administration commissioners. Despite several rounds of renovation and reconstruction, the size and scope of the garden remained far smaller than they had been before. After 1949, the official emphasis on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as a protorevolutionary peasant movement ensured new prominence for this site and for a particular vision of its past. In 1958, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum opened on the former grounds of the garden to promote the history of the Taiping as anti-imperialist, antifeudal heroes (figure 3). The museum replaced the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Memorial Hall, established elsewhere by the central government's Ministry of Culture in 1955. An associated research institute gathered materials and collected oral histories and artifacts. Guo Moruo (1892–1978), one of revolutionary China's most famous literati, wrote the calligraphy for the museum's sign.



Figure 3. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Museum.

In 2000, the museum underwent extensive renovations in order to ensure that it would better match the official message of reform and opening up. A heroic bust of the Taiping movement's leader, Hong Xiuquan, greets visitors at the entrance (figure 4). The overall message remains positive on balance—although in ways it was consistent with the times: the exhibits

portray the Taiping leaders as modernizing internationalists—and patriotic anti-imperialists. At the same time, a powerful diorama bleakly confronts the viewer with the environmental and human damage associated with war and instability. Chaos must be prevented; the center must hold.



Figure 4. Bust of Hong Xiuquan, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Museum.

But in spite of these efforts to refine its message, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Museum seems almost anachronistic in China’s twenty-first century. Why praise antiregime rebels from the provinces when the government’s current message is one of patriotism above all? The museum found it difficult to compete in the twenty-first-century tourist marketplace at a moment when even academics were losing interest in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement. The former “golden flower” of modern Chinese historiography seemed to be wilting in the postrevolutionary era. The connection between the Taiping, the party, and the revolution, in spite of decades of repetition, seemed less direct and less relevant than in previous times or in comparison with monuments and sites associated more immediately with the party’s revolutionary history. Tourists interested in pursuing “Red Tourism” clearly might prefer destinations such as Mao Zedong’s hometown at Shaoshan or the revolutionary base at Yan’an.²² The shopping delights informed by overtones of association with the city’s “traditional” pleasure quarters and examination hall drew crowds around the corner from the museum at the Qinhuai waterfront. How to participate in the imperative to strengthen local economies through tourism? How to be both patriotically educating and institutionally self-sustaining?

The museum celebrating the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement remains open and has been designated a “Base for Patriotic Education”; still, it has needed to bolster its market appeal through special exhibits and enhanced offerings.²³ The museum now actively promotes Reverence Garden—“the Best Garden in Old Nanjing” (Jinling diyi yuan)—as the main attraction both on the museum’s website and to visitors. Indeed, the splash page of the museum’s website gives equal billing to garden and museum; the visual (and auditory) style of the website emphasizes the garden with overtones of refinement and tradition.²⁴ The renovation of the garden as a new “class 4A scenic area” in 2007 was a joint project of the Nanjing city government, the city cultural bureau, and the city tourism office.²⁵ The novelty of this approach is striking: in 2005, a ticket granted entrance to the museum only; visitors proceeded directly across the paved courtyard and into the exhibit hall of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum. The garden was closed off for use as a high-end restaurant. Since 2007, the configuration has shifted. The price of admission now includes the Taiping exhibits and the garden—the latter of which continues to expand and to be developed. This blended marketing strategy seems to be enjoying some success. Almost all the online reviews of the museum on one tourism website (the Chinese version of TripAdvisor) focus enthusiastically on the garden.²⁶

Promotional materials, including the garden’s website, represent Reverence Garden as a luxurious and cultured site with imperial and literati associations. The website, for example, describes the garden (in Chinese) as a “classical scenic spot of Nanjing” and as a “shining pearl.” It introduces the garden as “the only Ming princely palace open to the public” and “in a state of relatively good preservation.” In this regard, visitors are told, it has “600 years of history.” The reference to the garden’s antiquity is clearly invented. Reverence Garden was destroyed in the mid-nineteenth century and completely rebuilt, with three instances of reconstruction since 1949, the last and most substantial of which took place in 2007. The website describes the garden’s layout as consisting of twenty scenic spots that are “classically elegant and exquisite,” with an “assemblage of majestic Ming and Qing architecture.” The site is compared to a “beautiful hand scroll” and a “peach blossom spring within the bustling city of Nanjing.”

The website extols imperial appreciation: Qianlong stayed here and was moved to rename it; he later ordered the imperial household to build a replica of it in Beijing. Visitors are invited to “return to the site that enchanted the princes and emperors of six centuries ago.” The website describes the garden as a sumptuous palace with both Ming and Qing imperial associations. The

emphasis throughout is on luxury, wealth, power, and beauty. Even in more recent times, central party and government leaders, as well as their provincial and local counterparts, have visited the garden and praised it. Moreover, “powerful media outlets,” including Chinese Central Television, have promoted tourism at the “Ming princely palace and Qianlong traveling palace.”²⁷ The provincial surveillance commissioner’s *yamen* (office and residence) (figure 5) is one among the architectural elements recently rebuilt at Reverence Garden. It contains an exhibit celebrating the officials and literary talents that once gathered there and (at least subliminally) the official commitment to wealth and power that made such gatherings possible.



Figure 5. Reconstruction of the provincial surveillance commissioner’s *yamen*.

In another pavilion, in 2013, visitors encountered a temporary display of posters celebrating the construction of a replica of Reverence Garden as part of an international garden exposition held in Beijing in 2013 under the joint sponsorship of the Beijing city government and the National Department of Housing. The posters use the rubric of “Splendid Era, Splendid Gatherings, and Splendid Site” to recount the history of the garden: its literary heritage, its association with the Qianlong emperor, its use as a princely mansion during the Taiping period, and its destruction in the Qing reconquest. The posters remind visitors that, since the 1949 revolution, Reverence Garden has been restored at great expense to the state on three occasions: in the 1960s, in the 1980s, and between 2007 and 2009. Thus, the poster concludes, “the

historical and literary views of the splendors of the Ming and Qing have been seen again at Reverence Garden.” The renovation of Reverence Garden (and the replica displayed in Beijing) thus symbolizes the new Glorious Age. Here, the party’s twenty-first-century role looms large: it curates the useful past; the gardens symbolize the cultural attainments synonymous with China’s national heritage. There is a localist dimension as well (the garden was, after all, reconstructed by the city government and cultural relics bureau): the posters serve to remind Beijing to hew to the theme of the exposition and to “Remember Jiangnan”— presented as China’s economic and cultural center.



Figure 6 (left). Art students in Reverence Garden.
Figure 7 (right). Reverence Garden, under construction.

At Reverence Garden we find a new vision of a bright day of leisure and literary attainments for China’s present. This vision of refined elites, emperors, and princes elides the once-useful revolutionary past of feminist, land-redistributing, anti-Manchu rebels—and similarly occludes a history of destruction and renovation in favor of sumptuous, timeless, and eminently consumable images of wealth, power, and leisure. The party and the government occupy the roles of emperor and elites as patrons and preservers of the garden. Again, here, where a posse of art students paint pictures of a brand-new garden still under construction

(figures 6 and 7), tourists can imagine themselves as Ming literati, a coterie of Qing officials, or the Qianlong emperor. Even the seemingly timeless vision of the Chinese garden has its present historical context. Gardens wrecked in China's mid-nineteenth-century civil war have been rebuilt, quite recently, in thrall to a new message of cultural heritage and harmonious national unity emanating from Beijing—and in service to domestic tourism locally—to enhance ticket sales at a museum honoring a revolutionary past of diminished relevance at present.

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Notes

- 1 For a study that deals with similar issues but through the lens of museums, see Denton (2014).
- 2 On the layers of significance buried and unearthed at a former Beijing princely garden, see Schwarcz (2008), especially the introduction.
- 3 On architectural sites as loci of “Chinese national essence,” see Carroll (2006, 182–185).
- 4 For example, the Lan Su Garden in Portland celebrates the city’s sister-city relationship with Suzhou; Chinese gardens in the United States depend on donations from individual, corporate, and foundation sources.
- 5 See, for example, Li (2009).
- 6 Clunas also notes that studies of Chinese gardens “continue to collapse ‘the Chinese garden’ very rapidly to ‘the Chinese idea of nature’” (1996, 12).
- 7 The gazetteer proposes to document all textually attested gardens—without regard for whether they were extant or not—in order to ensure their nominal immortality.
- 8 Also cited in Meyer-Fong (2013, 226–227, fn 1).
- 9 The Wading-in-Water Garden was torched by soldiers during the war; the property later was purchased by the provincial surveillance commissioner, who added new structures and renamed it (Li and Feng 1882, 46:38b).
- 10 According to its introduction, Hu Xianghan’s book was intended to facilitate sightseeing by providing literary references in a convenient format. The criterion for inclusion for gardens and tombs is that they are still extant or that some physical trace might still be found. The author notes that it is too confusing to include things that are textually attested but that can no longer be observed (Hu 1926, preface 1a).

- 11 For examples, see *Xu zuan Yangzhou fuzhi* (Yingjie, Yan, and Fang 1874, 5:27a, 5:29b–30a). On Yangzhou’s destruction and failure to recover, see Meyer-Fong (2003, 192–193) and Finnane (2004, 308–315).
- 12 On gaudiness (and the failure of good taste) as a hallmark of what was wrong with the Taiping government, see Withers (1983, chapter 2).
- 13 See also Zhang (2007, 41).
- 14 According to W. Charles Wooldridge (2015), such was the case with Yu Yuan (Fool’s Garden). The garden’s owner, Hu Enxie, justified the expense incurred in constructing the garden by describing it as a retreat for his aging mother (personal communication; cited by permission).
- 15 For similar developments in Hangzhou, see Wang (2000).
- 16 One of these postwar gardens, He yuan, figures prominently on the tourist circuit in Yangzhou today.
- 17 See the Wikipedia entry for “Yangzhou,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangzhou>, accessed July 24, 2014.
- 18 For an extended treatment of Zhang Guanglie and his garden, see Meyer-Fong (2013, chapter 6).
- 19 The garden, located in Xianzi alley, was destroyed, except for one scenic element, in a fire during the Kangxi period. Later, the site was used as a villa at least nominally associated with Anhui (Wanshan bieshu).
- 20 For a historical overview of Manifest Loyalty Shrines, see Meyer-Fong (2013, chapter 5).
- 21 We can see this, for example, in Xu Feng’en’s picaresque memoir of his life during the war (Xu and Fang 1994).
- 22 On “Red Tourism” and the Chinese government’s promotion of revolutionary tourism for patriotic and local development purposes in the twenty-first century, see Denton (2012, 248–249; 2014, chapter 10).
- 23 In addition to promoting the garden, the museum seeks to reach a broader audience in other ways as well. In April 2014, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum hosted an exhibit on the sent-down youth of the Cultural Revolution period—the sent-down youth themselves represented a sizable audience. The theme of the exhibit was the patriotic contributions made by sent-down youth to the motherland. See the “Taiping tianguo lishi bowuguan/Zhan yuan: Jinling diyi yuan” website, <http://www.njtptglbwg.com/infook.asp?id=249>, accessed November 14, 2014.
- 24 See *ibid.* Note that when visited again on December 10, 2014, the site had a new flash page, with a red background featuring the date “1956,” rousing music, images from a frieze featuring the Taiping army, a link for those interested in applying to volunteer at the museum, and (at the bottom) links to the websites of other museums and organizations. The museum’s main website, accessed by clicking on the flash page, continues to feature soothing “traditional” music, gently wafting bamboo, and “classical” visuals associated with the garden.
- 25 See the “Nanjing Zhan yuan” website, <http://www.njzy.net/>, accessed November 14, 2014.
- 26 See reviews of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum on Daodao/TripAdvisor, http://daodao.com/Attraction_Review-g294220-d459773-Reviews-

- Taiping_Heavenly_Kingdom_Historical_Museum-Nanjing_Jiangsu.html, accessed November 14, 2014. The reviews are in Chinese.
- 27 See the “Nanjing Zhan yuan” website, <http://www.njzy.net/>, accessed November 14, 2014.

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