The Chinese Garden and World Literature

Martin Puchner

The Pleasing History, one of the first Chinese novels to be translated into a Western language, reached the public by a circuitous route. Its initial translator was James Wilkinson, who was working in Canton for the East India Company. Having decided to study Chinese, he took to translating the popular novel Hau Kio Choaan (《好逑传》) into English, but abandoned the effort after completing about three-quarters of the work when he left China in 1719. Decades later the manuscript, written on Chinese paper and containing many corrections that betray how much Wilkinson labored over it, found its way into the hands of Bishop Thomas Percy, who corrected Wilkinson's manuscript, changed things around when they didn’t make sense to him, and cut repetitive passages until he was satisfied with the product and published it in 1761. The result was far from perfect. Seventy years later, John Francis Davis undertook a new translation, wryly observing that the original translator was not only guilty of innumerable errors and omissions, but had managed to mistranslate the very title of the work. His new translation, now more correctly entitled The Fortunate Union was published with the Oriental Translation Fund in 1829.

For Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Davis’s painstaking labor came too late. Ever looking for new literature from abroad, he had gotten his hands on Percy’s flawed translation in 1769. Despite its faults, this translation made him a convert to Chinese literature, which he followed as best he could for the rest of his life. In 1813 library records show him borrowing several volumes on China, including the Travels of Marco Polo, the first Western account of China, with Goethe noting the intriguing combination of finely observed description and completely made-up fantasy that gave this work the quality of a fairy tale. A few years later, Goethe got in touch with one of the earliest professional Sinologists, asking him questions about Chinese literature, and in 1827 he is reported to have conversed at length about another Chinese translation, Deux Cousins, which he had read yet another Chinese novel, Courtship, in an English translation.

It was in the context of commenting on the experience that he term World Literature. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that we now understand the world from the contact by German reader and Chinese literature.

So few Chinese novels in the West in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Goethe read everything he could find in these novels and how the impression of Chinese literature, a Chinese novel he read, is a fast-moving story of a woman who each get caught up in plots and schemes, full of cunning deceptions, hence united in marriage. This did not bother Percy, the perhaps because it reminded him of picaresque novels such as

Rather, the novel seemed to him to dwell excessively on detail. Goethe was not bothered by the plot either and publicly read from the novel in 1815, almost two decades after having encountered it for the first time. Clearly it stayed with him for a long time. *Les Deux Cousins*, the last Chinese novel he read, is even more extreme in this regard. It is premised entirely on strange coincidences, oracular predictions, and a contrived final happy end.

Only *Chinese Courtship*, which Goethe read when he coined the term world literature, is different. Composed in verse, its plot is relatively simple and its main ambition is literary artistry. Indeed, the overwhelming importance of literary fluency stands at the center of the story, in which the male protagonist is rewarded for his literary education and his ability to dash off sophisticated poems on a whim with a lucrative government post and marriage to his beloved. The plot mainly serves as an occasion for elaborate descriptions of gardens and the recitation and inscription of poetry. At a time when the Western novel was considered a latecomer to the literary canon and decidedly middle brow, a verse novel such as *Chinese Courtship* showed Goethe the possibilities of a high-art novel, something that would take the Western novel another hundred years to achieve fully.

Taken together, however, these three Chinese novels remind us that for Goethe, world literature was not composed of only the...
most elevated art works, the best of the best, but of a cross-section of available works, sometimes in severely flawed translations. World literature, for him, was not a super canon of rarified works perfectly translated, but a selective reading of available works. “Read what you can, read widely and non-selectively as long as this reading takes you far outside your comfort zone,” is the world literature imperative one can deduce from Goethe’s own practice of reading what through him we now call world literature.

Goethe never made it to China, and the number of Chinese novels he managed to track down was small. He was highly conscious of the fact that what he read was only the tip of an iceberg: “the Chinese have thousands of novels,” he told his incredulous interlocutor, exaggerating their number. Given how hard it was for Goethe to find novels and information about Chinese literature, it is not surprising that his conception of world literature revolved around translation and the literary marketplace. Nor is it surprising that for him world literature remained something of an aspiration: “the period of world literature is at hand,” he wrote, but we cannot simply wait passively for it to happen: “we must strive to hasten its approach.” In this respect, too, his encounter with Chinese novels proved decisive for his view of world literature as a project rather than as an accomplished fact.

Both Percy’s and Davis’s translations of The Fortunate Union are now widely available. In 1844 Widener Library at Harvard University purchased Davis’s translation with its library fund. In 2007 Google scanned it as part of its collaboration with the Harvard University library system. Like the other novels Goethe read and the hundreds, if not thousands, of Chinese novels he suspected must exist, The Fortunate Union is now available on Google Books, which is how I came to read it while traveling in China in 2010. I like to think that Goethe would have been pleased with this form of distribution. Thanks to the work of translators and editors, university libraries and Google Books, the era of world literature has now arrived. We can read widely, more widely than Goethe could, and what is more, we can combine this type of reading with travel, something Goethe himself did as best he could, most prominently in his travels to Italy. In the era of mass tourism, world literature Goethe-style is emerging as the norm rather than the exception.

* * *

N otably absent from Goethe’s selection are the great 18th-century Chinese novels such as Cao Xueqin’s Story of the Stone. Not translated until after Goethe’s death, The Story of the Stone is China’s most lasting contribution to the novel. I find it almost irresistible to speculate about how Goethe would have reacted to it, and in what follows I will try to read the novel through Goethe’s eyes. This also means that I am approaching it very much as a reader with a deeply skewed view of the Chinese literature of the language, dependent on translations.

Even to understand the reason why The Stone received the status of a world novel, one must first look behind it, such as the other novels are not. The story of the protagonist falls in love, which tests his resolve to succeed. After an imperial decree, the protagonist fails and ends up into an adventure with accidents, tests, and elaborates descriptions.

It seems that the Stone uses this in order to do so. Here, the protagonist is awakened; even to study for the exams does so only reluctantly, he hardly ever...
as a reader with a very limited knowledge of
the Chinese literary tradition, no knowledge
of the language, and therefore as a reader
dependent on translation.

Even to untutored eyes like mine, the
reason why The Story of the Stone acquired
the status of a classic becomes apparent
when one compares it to the novels published
before it, such as the ones Goethe read. These
other novels are sometimes called literati-
novels or scholar-novels, and are premised
on something of a formula: the young
protagonist falls in love and before long
declares his love, often in a garden; he then
strives to excel at the imperial examination,
which tests knowledge of the classics and
promises government posts to those who
succeed. After overcoming some difficulties,
the protagonist finally distinguishes himself
and ends up marrying his beloved by
imperial decree. This basic formula is often
varied considerably. Sometimes it is turned
into an adventure tale with many intervening
accidents, tests, and distractions; or novels
stick to the plot formula but embellish it with
elaborate descriptions of nature.

It seems to me that The Story of the
Stone uses this type of novel as a backdrop
in order to do something entirely different.
Here, the protagonist doesn’t quite fall in love
in the same fashion, although he is sexually
awakened; even though his father wants him
to study for the imperial examination, he
does so only reluctantly; and most startlingly,
he hardly ever leaves the confines of his
house. Told over two thousand-odd pages, the
entire story takes place within the enclosure
of the Wang family compound. The one time
the protagonist does leave it, relatively early
on in the story, the experience is outright
scary: fear of kidnapping turns a simple visit
to relatives into a nightmare, and the young
protagonist, Bao-yu, is rushed back to safety
in disguise.

The Story of the Stone thus refuses to
engage the machinery that drives literati
novels forward and remains deliberately
stuck at home. Instead of following
suspenseful plots, it devotes all attention to
the minute examination of life inside this
enclosed, artificial world, registering the
fine shades of social slights and the smallest
facets of emotions. Where in the literati
novels, the protagonist rushes forward to
reach his goal, with detractors devising
complicates ruses to hinder his progress,
here no one ever rushes anywhere; instead
characters stroll through the garden, they
loiter and linger, or they sit still. The relation
of The Story of the Stone to those earlier
novels strikes me a bit like Hamlet’s relation
to the formulaic revenge tragedy whose plot
machinery it brings to a halt.

The Story of the Stone stays inside the
compound, and the compound itself acquires
supreme importance as the architectural
space that makes the novel possible.
The compound contains an intricate
combination of buildings and landscapes
designed according to the principles of
the Chinese garden. The Chinese garden aroused much interest in Goethe’s time, especially in England, where its system of winding paths, labyrinthine structures, and a general shunning of geometrical symmetries reminded many of the English garden. William Chambers, writing in The Gentleman’s Magazine in 1757, was the first to introduce a broader Western public to the Chinese garden, describing its aesthetic as based on the “irregularities” of nature and marveling at the high art of creating artificial rock formations. In every larger Chinese town, Chambers writes, you can find highly trained landscape artists and gardens.

There were few writers in the West more intrigued by gardens than Goethe, and I am sure that this dimension of The Story of the Stone would have particularly intrigued him. Goethe himself lived for extended periods in his garden house in Weimar, and his greatest novel, Elective Affinities (1809), revolves around the conflict between the French and the English garden. But Goethe’s interest in gardens went beyond aesthetics. He was an active botanist and spent significant amounts of time looking for the original plant, or Urpflanze, driven by a theory of botany that occupied him for decades.

When I first traveled to China in the imaginary wake of Goethe, his interest in gardens and botany led me to the center of Chinese garden culture, the southern city of Suzhou. It is to this place that many literati withdrew to build their famous gardens in part because it was here that they could find the most important ingredient: the bizarre rocks from which artificial mountains are made are in abundance around Lake Taihu, or Grand Lake.

To learn more about these gardens, I took a high-speed train from Shanghai to Suzhou, the kind of train that makes US infrastructure look like something from the middle of the last century, which is in fact when most of it was built. From the train I saw the rapid development that has transformed Chinese cities and towns virtually overnight. I was surprised to find in the midst of this building frenzy the old center of Suzhou, with its low buildings, narrow streets, and its famous canals. The gardens are hidden away, protected by tall walls, trying to keep the bustling city at bay.

Originally, I learned, the Chinese garden was built on the ideal of the retreat, retreat from the city, but also from political and social life. The hermit, living in some mountainous wilderness and devoting himself to the study and writing of poetry, has played an important role in Chinese literature and culture. But this figure was

contested by tradition and preaching engagement or service. The Suzhou story between the feeling of they are is some far-
contested by the even stronger tradition of Confucianism, preaching the virtues of civic engagement and government service. The Chinese gardens in Suzhou strike me as compromise between the two: they create the feeling of mountain retreats, but they are located in the city, not some far-away rural area.

The city gardens did not remain the province of high-ranking administrators for long and became coveted objects of prestige for a rising class of nouveaux riches. It was this group that needed to be told how to build a proper Chinese garden, and it was for them that garden manuals were written. More recently, Chinese gardens have become a cultural export product, an industry in which a Suzhou company has taken a lead role.

As I experienced it, the Chinese Garden consists of a labyrinth of winding paths, waterways, bridges, and pavilions designed to disorient the visitor. Water, rocks, plantings, and buildings are not neatly separated, but delicately intertwined. A covered path may cross a waterway only to graze an outer chamber of a building, from whence it enters the cavernous shade of an artificial mountain. As one follows the path, one is faced with vistas that seek to combine rock and water, blossoms and architecture. Indeed, nothing is more important than carefully composed views. When inside a pavilion, one can see through windows onto small, enclosed mini-garden, like museum displays, that may consist of a single bamboo plant or a choice specimen of bizarre rock. Some windows have latticed frames that look like picture frames to enforce the sense that what one is seeing are pictures. Promising vistas are especially marked and framed. Cheng Ji, the author of the first garden manual, was in fact a painter before he devoted himself to the art of the Chinese garden. Chambers, the first Western commentator on the art of the Chinese garden, picked up on this connection as well when he writes that Chinese gardens are as carefully composed as European paintings.

The Metropolitan Museum in New York City took this comparison literally. A small portion of one of Suzhou's most famous gardens, the Master-of-Nets-Garden, is carefully reconstructed inside the museum, including some plants. I have always found it strange, when visiting the Met, to enter a room that is brightly lit through a skylight and smells like a greenhouse. I suppose we still have trouble understanding anything as art that cannot be placed inside a museum so the Chinese garden had to be dragged inside. But there is one good effect to this otherwise absurd operation: walking around the Master-of-Nets Garden inside the Met sharpens one's eye for the picturesque qualities of its
For Chinese literature, a name such as "Pavilion and inside pavilion" indeed, the idea that inspired the story of the classic Chinese gardens of the 8th century poet Wang Wei. In the "Walkways shadowy lofty, giving rise to Wang Wei's line 'The path between being and non-being', the gardens were just as they were contemporary.

There is a feeling of how closely interwoven the 'Story of the Pavilion and inside pavilion' was with the entire poem. A member of an Imperial family, wrestling young to isolating them a year, could not

Having long admired the Master-of-Nets Garden at the Met, the first thing I did upon arriving in Suzhou was to seek out the original. It was late afternoon and around 100 degrees Fahrenheit. After the chaos of the streets, entering the garden feels like entering another world. You enter buildings, paths and walkways and often do not know whether you are inside or outside. The walls of enclosed courtyards have latticed windows through which one can see into another courtyard or a small pond, and just when it looks like one is leaving the courtyard, one finds oneself in a pavilion, which in turn affords a look onto a small garden-display. It is this feeling of being both inside and outside, along with the delightful disorientation it causes, that the small Met exhibit could never replicate.

I didn't realize that my visit to the Master-of-Nets Garden in the late afternoon was lucky in that the garden was quite empty. The next day I visited more gardens, which were packed with large groups of tourists. Each group had either identical parasols, or caps, or whole outfits, and was led by a guide equipped with a megaphone. Often, different groups would converge in the same pavilion, or small courtyard, with the megaphones outdoing each other. The intricate web of half-enclosed spaces can thus also serve as an echo chamber for megaphone cacophony. The reconstructed Met garden, by contrast, is almost always empty and quiet—the kind of contrast to the roaring city that Cheng would have endorsed. The only people talking are the gardeners, who are taking care of the plants with the same delicacy as if they were restoring paintings.

displays and vistas.
For Chinese gardens, there is one art form that is even more important than painting or the art of constructing vistas: literature. Each building, pavilion, and gazebo has an imaginative name such as Osmanthus Fragrance Pavilion or Cloudy Stairway Pavilion and everywhere we find inscriptions of poetry, on panels inside pavilions, on outside walls, on covered walkways.

Indeed, the ideal of the mountain retreat that inspired the Chinese garden was based on classical Chinese poems as well, such as those of the 8th century poet (and painter) Wang Wei. In his manual Cheng writes: "Walkways should be winding and towers lofty, giving rise to the feeling expressed in Wang Wei’s line ‘The river flows beyond the edge of the world,’ and in harmony with his words ‘The prospect of the mountains lies between being and non-being.’" Chinese gardens were inspired by classical poetry, just as they were the ideal setting for contemporary poets to exercise their craft.

There is no better way to get a sense of how closely gardens and literature are interwoven than chapter seventeen of The Story of the Stone—for me, the pinnacle of the entire novel, and I imagine that it would have been Goethe’s favorite as well. A member of the household has become an Imperial Mistress and sent to live in the Forbidden City. Seeing that the practice of wrestling young women from their family and isolating them in the Forbidden City causes them hardship, the Emperor, out of the goodness of his heart, has decreed that once a year they may return home. In preparation for such a visit, the Wang family now builds a whole new garden, whose construction we are thereby allowed to witness. Grounds are cleared, artificial mountains constructed, vistas composed, flowers planted—the author is giving us a course in garden design as if he were competing with garden manuals.

Then comes the naming of buildings and the inscription of poetry. The spontaneous composition of poems is central to all literati novels, and gardens are often the preferred location that prompts the exercise of this art. But The Story of the Stone goes much further: it shows that without literature, that is, without pithy, allusive names for buildings and without couplets that capture particular vistas and subtly allude to classical poetry, a Chinese garden is incomplete. Plantings are merely the raw material that must be embellished by literature.

Chapter seventeen has the young protagonist, his stern father, and his two literary teachers walk around the garden in order to come up with the most appropriate names for its buildings as well as with the couplets that are to embellish its most distinct vistas and spots. Bao-yu is an indifferent scholar and hence a grave disappointment
to his father. Even though the composition of appropriate poetry is ostensibly a group effort, the real purpose of this scene is to test Bao-yu; it is his chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his father. The Story of the Stone not only shows us the practice of adding poetry to the garden; it also demonstrates to what extent that practice was bound up with the literary education of the elite even as that elite, at least its youngest representative, had grown weary of the labors this education required.

Even though Bao-yu acts as if he couldn’t care less about his teachers, whom Cao Xueqin presents as fools who are ever flattering their master, he actually comes up with pretty good names and poems. He criticizes his teachers when their proposals are too obvious or otherwise inadequate. He remembers that the garden is meant to celebrate the return of the Emperor’s Concubine and consequently weaves subtle allusions to the Emperor into his suggestions. He alludes to classical poets while also capturing what is special about each spot in the garden and each view it enables. He recognizes particular plantings and combinations of rare plants as themselves allusions to particular classical poems. What’s more, he intelligently discusses the aesthetic principles of the garden. When exhorted to use only natural lines, he questions the status of nature in the Chinese garden, observing that in the artifice of the garden, what is natural is merely that which hides its artificiality. When his father criticizes the method of alluding to classics as mere imitation, his teachers defend him by arguing that even the great poets of the past imitated older poets while managing to outdo them. Bao-yu’s father is largely dismissive of his son’s efforts, but he is secretly pleased that his son understands the principles of poetic inscription. In the process we, the readers, learn those principles as well—much better than by reading contemporary garden manuals. This is particularly useful if one approaches this novel as I did, namely, as a reader of world literature: it is almost as if the novel is teaching you how to read literature even if you don’t possess detailed knowledge of its cultural context.

It seems to me that there is another dynamic at work as well. Cao Xueqin inserted his own poetic passages into his prose and thus directly competed with the classical poets as well as with the characters in his novels. This means that in depicting the close connection between poetry and garden, Cao Xueqin not only pays homage to these two revered art forms, but also tries to outdo them in the newer medium of the novel.
By crafting a novel that quickly became a classic, he succeeded in showing that the novel could aspire to the condition of poetry. With these thoughts on my mind, I was interested to learn that an Imperial Concubine in the nineteenth century had her small garden in the Forbidden City inscribed with lines, not from classical poetry, but from *The Story of the Stone*. I surmise that the inscription of Cao’s lines in the Forbidden City must have sealed the rise of the novel in the canon of Chinese literature.

Given the prominence of *The Story of the Stone*, we can ask what it ultimately does to the Chinese garden. Even though this novel spends over two thousand pages inside the compound and devotes considerable attention to individual vistas and buildings in such chapters as chapter seventeen, I have always found it difficult to reconstruct the actual layout of the garden. We are never given enough information to draw up a floor plan or get a sense of the overall arrangement of buildings and landscapes. Chapter seventeen illustrates this labyrinthine character perfectly. It takes us on a tour of the garden, starting outside the simple, whitewashed wall. Upon entering, a first surprise awaits us: an artificial mountain has been erected to hide the rest of the garden. We then go on winding paths through caverns, rooms, and covered walkways, admiring particular views and situations, but we never get a sense of the whole. Instead, what counts are surprises as when a sudden turn in the road reveals an unexpected sight, or when a path suddenly leads into an enclosure. But the biggest surprise occurs when the group unexpectedly finds itself back at the rocky mountain where it has started.

Chapter seventeen is a mini-version of the entire novel. You spend hours upon hours, weeks upon weeks, in a space you cannot quite grasp in its entirety. While Joyce, in *Ulysses*, had used a city map to make sure that his protagonists moved around the city correctly, I find it difficult to imagine that there is a real space that Cao Xueqin used or even imagined. And while Joyce had claimed that you could use *Ulysses* to reconstruct Dublin if it were destroyed, Cao Xueqin seems to have gone out of his way to make it difficult to reconstruct the garden of *The Story of the Stone*. In creating this disorientation, it seems to me, he captures not the overall architecture of the garden, but its desired effect on the visitor. You are supposed to be absorbed not by the overall arrangement, but by individual vistas and juxtapositions. This is precisely what the novel conveys over and over again. How does a particular spot look like? At what time of the day is it lovely to gaze out of a particular latticed window? What do you see when you stroll down a particular path when the lotus blossoms bloom? And how can such moments be captured in a poem? Instead of telling us how the garden compound was arranged, Cao Xueqin shows us how a Chinese garden should be experienced. He
gives us not only a manual of the Chinese garden, but a distillation of what it feels like to walk through one.

The wisdom of this strategy was driven home to me a few years later, when I actually visited the compound. To be precise, I should say that I visited a replica of it, built in Beijing as a film set for a popular TV adaptation of the novel. And to be even more precise, I shouldn’t call it a replica because there is no original; rather it is an attempt to translate the literary compound into physical reality. Unlike the gardens of Suzhou, The Story of the Stone compound was nearly deserted when I visited, in part because I did so during a particularly bitter cold spell in December 2012. The visit was disappointing. The arrangement was much more geometric than what I had taken away from the novel, and in any case moving through the open terrain reoriented everything: rather than capturing the experience of a Chinese garden, it presented a lackluster version of one. A similar experience, perhaps even more extreme, greeted me when I went back to the Metropolitan Museum in New York to visit the portion of the Master-of-Net’s Garden once again. The sterile, green house-like atmosphere of the small display was disappointing after having experienced the pleasure of getting lost, of unexpected vistas and juxtapositions, in the original.

After these two disappointments, I took up the novel again and re-read chapter seventeen. In the end, it seems to me that the experience of reading the novel, funneled through the experience of the actual gardens, is the best strategy of all.

The insufficiency of the sensory garden experience, I suspect, is the reason why adding a literary layer is so important to the Chinese garden. Cao Xueqin recognized this and went all the way, creating a Chinese garden made of nothing but literature. This, in my view, is his contribution to world literature. It is a contribution that Goethe, equally interested in gardens and Chinese literature, would have very much appreciated.
Notes:


3. For many details on Goethe’s relation to China, see *Goethe und China—China und Goethe*, edited by Günther Debon. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985.


8. Eckermann, 211.
