

TRANSLATION TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the
**Society of Architectural Historians,
Australia and New Zealand**
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

**Hing-wah Chau, "Wang Shu's Xiangshan Campus and Tong Jun's Writings
on the Chinese Garden," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural
Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation*, edited by Christoph
Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast,
Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 51-58.**

Published in

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

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Wang Shu's Xiangshan Campus and Tong Jun's Writings on the Chinese Garden

As the first locally trained Chinese architect to receive the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize (2012), Wang Shu and his works have attracted widespread international attention. He is obsessed with Chinese cultural resources, including Chinese garden design and is inspired by Tong Jun's writings on the Chinese garden. This paper examines the relationship between Wang's Xiangshan Campus design and Tong's relevant writings.

Wang Shu (王澐, b. 1963) is a prominent Chinese architect who attracts international attention. Receiving the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2012, he is considered “the most humanistic and literary architect” in contemporary China.¹ Referring to the rich legacy of Chinese traditions, he has a keen interest in Chinese literati traditions, ranging from Chinese garden design, landscape painting to calligraphy. Studying architecture at the Nanjing Institute of Technology from 1981 to 1988, Wang was inspired by Prof. Tong Jun (Chuin Tung, 童雱, 1900-83) who was a professor there from 1952 to 1983.²

Tong belonged to the first batch of Chinese students studying overseas. He studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania from 1925 to 1928 under the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program. Despite the Beaux-Arts based architectural education received in the US, he actively participated in the research of the Chinese garden shortly after his return to China in 1931. Through fieldwork and site measurement of famous gardens in the south of Yangtze River in eastern China, he published the article “Chinese Gardens” in *Tien Hsia Monthly* in 1936 and compiled the book, *A Survey of Gardens in the South of the Yangtze River (Jiangnan Yuanlinzhi)* in 1937 with photos and layout plans in scale.³ Although due to various wars and social upheavals, this book could only be published in 1963, it still had ground-breaking contribution to the Chinese garden research. In 1978, Tong wrote the preface titled “Suzhou Gardens” for the book *Suzhou Classical Gardens* by Prof. Liu Dunzhen (1897-1968) and in 1983, two weeks before his demise, he completed his final work, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, which was specifically written in English for introducing the art of Chinese garden to the world.⁴ Throughout a period of more than half a century, Tong devoted himself to the study of Chinese classical garden, which has far-reaching influence to subsequent researchers and garden designers.

Wang claims himself as a member of the Chinese literati and explicitly expresses Tong’s influence on him. By referring to the Section “Garden and the Literati” of *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, Wang agrees with Tong regarding the importance of the garden for the literati to have a refuge away from “mundane worries and everyday struggles”.⁵ Tong further elaborates the relationship between garden-making, amateur participation, personal interest and taste:

“The literati, and not the horticulturalist nor the landscape architect, could well manage to design a classical Chinese garden any time. As an amateur, he might accomplish this poetic and romantic undertaking if not with distinction, at least with personal interest and taste. Personal interest and taste, be it emphasized, counts here much more than mere technical knowledge.”⁶

1 Yu Bing, ed., *Domus + 78: Chinese Architects & Designers* (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 2006), 298.

2 The Nanjing Institute of Technology was renamed as Southeast University in 1988.

3 Tong Jun, “Chinese Gardens,” (1936) *Tongjun Wenji [Collection of Tong Jun's Writings]*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 2000), 35-61. Tong Jun, *Jiangnan Yuanlinzhi [A Survey of Gardens in the South of the Yangtze River]* (1937) (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 1984 2nd ed.).

4 Tong Jun, “Suzhou Gardens,” (originally published as the preface to the book *Suzhou Classical Gardens* by Prof. Liu Dunzhen, 1978) In *Tongjun Wenji [Collection of Tong Jun's Writings]*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 2000), 262-74. Tong Jun, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* (1983) (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 1997).

5 Wang Shu, “Zao Yuan Ji,” [“Record of Garden-making”] *Jianzhushi [Architect]* 86 (Feb 1999): 79.

6 Tong, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, 35. [The quotation has been refined by Hing-wah Chau]

Similarly, Wang's emphasis on amateur participation and simple handcraft rather than professional boundaries and technical knowledge bears a close resemblance to Tong's way of thinking:

"One of the problems of professional architecture is to narrowly focus on architecture and to consider it to be too important than other aspects. However, a house is more fundamental than a building as it is closely related to our everyday life. Before becoming an architect, I was a member of literati. Architecture is merely an amateur activity. Humanistic atmosphere of a place is more important than architecture and simple handcraft is more valuable than technology. Amateur architecture, at the outset, expresses an attitude, a critical attitude to experimental architecture, probably taking more fundamental and ultimate experiments than professional architecture."⁷

Wang deliberately kept a distance from official design institutes or private developers after graduation, which was in striking contrast with his peers who were busy immersing themselves in numerous projects during the building boom in the 1990s. He preferred to work as a freelance designer and even a construction worker, so that he could learn how to build through his collaboration with artisans. To him, the professional knowledge that he learned before was insufficient. By naming his atelier as "Amateur Architecture Studio", he strategically positions himself as an "amateur" who acquires knowledge through a direct observation of everyday life rather than being confined within professional architectural knowledge.

As a professor at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, Wang was involved in the design of the whole Xiangshan Campus (Phase I, 2004; Phase II, 2007). Rather than following the conventional approach of being situated in a government-zoned higher education district with well-established infrastructural provisions or having a regular campus layout with clear demarcation of zoning, teaching buildings of the Xiangshan Campus are located around a small hill called Xiangshan (象山), incorporating garden design principles and emphasizing the importance of the natural landscape to the campus environment. Since Tong summarizes Chinese garden design principles as contrast, meandering, and vistas,⁸ so the Xiangshan Campus will be analysed in terms of these principles to illustrate the relationship between Wang's design and Tong's writings on the Chinese garden

Contrast

"... by architecture we mean buildings tastefully designed and appropriately disposed. In a group of buildings, their positions are determined by comparative importance and determine, in turn, the spaces in between. Rhythm and harmony must be the chief consideration in such layout."⁹

In the Xiangshan Campus, the alignments and dispositions of teaching buildings sensitively follow the undulating profile of the small hill in the centre. The spaces in between buildings are carefully designed for creating variety for different uses and controlling the rhythm of the overall layout.

7 Wang Shu, Xu Jiang et al., *Tiles Garden: A dialogue between city, between an architect and an artist* [China Pavilion - 10th International Architecture Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, 2006] (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art, 2006), 16.

8 Tong, *A Survey of Gardens in the South of the Yangtze River*, 8.

9 Tong, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, 3-4.

The comparative importance of buildings can be reflected by their strategic positions, such as the library at the prominent location near the front entrance to facilitate ease of access, while the administrative tower is situated at the end of Phase I overlooking the campus.

"The Chinese garden is primarily not a single wide open space, but is divided by corridors and walls into courts in which buildings ... dominate the scenery and attract one's attention. Garden architecture in China is so delightfully informal and playful that even without flowers and trees it would still make a garden."¹⁰

Teaching buildings of Phase I are mainly in courtyard typology, either fully enclosed or enclosed by three sides. In contrast to the relatively static and formal arrangement in Phase I, the Phase II campus design shows Wang's more elaborate formal manipulation, creating tension and variation of the overall composition in a playful manner. Despite the contrasting design between these two phases, family resemblance between buildings is achieved by the use of dominating colours of white walls, grey roof tiles and natural woodwork.



Fig. 1: Courtyard teaching building in Phase I, Xiangshan Campus (2004). Photograph by Hing-wah Chau.

"The Chinese garden is usually enclosed in high walls its different courts, too, are divided by walls sometimes with porches running along one or both sides ... the wall is vitally necessary for isolating the garden from the rest of the world."¹¹

Walls are common space defining elements on the Xiangshan Campus and are incorporated into the topographical considerations of the site. By shielding against the busy traffic outside, tranquil learning environment can be provided. Apart from the walls, courtyard design can serve the purpose of enclosure.

"If straight walks, long avenues and well balanced parterres resulted from the mathematical mind of the West, China old philosopher desired to escape from such still orderliness and geometrical rigidity...care was taken to achieve contrast through open versus closed space, dark versus bright spots, high versus low openings and big versus small surface or volume."¹²

10 Tong, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, 14.

11 Tong, "Chinese Gardens," 38.

12 Tong, "Suzhou Gardens," 268-69.

In addition to the degrees of openness and enclosure, Wang deliberately creates gloomy corridors with scattered wall openings for allowing sunlight to enter, providing a contrasting interior atmosphere. Some of the wall openings are designed in resemblance to latticework of traditional Chinese architecture, yet the scale has been enlarged to cover entire facades for the visual impact. The magnified latticework not merely serves for pure ornamentation, but generates striking light and shadow effects to the interior space.



Fig. 2: Fig. 2 Teaching Building no. 21 in Phase II, Xiangshan Campus (2007). Photograph by Hing-wah Chau.

Wang introduced a series of so-called Taihu Lake Houses (太湖房) in the campus. The form of the Taihu Lake House was derived from the famous rock, Cloud-Capped Peak (冠雲峰) at the Lingering Garden (留園) in Suzhou as the Cloud-Capped Peak is a representative rock of the Taihu Lake. The irregular silhouettes of the Taihu Lake Houses have been further applied to wall openings. Since Wang was impressed by the Mountain Watching Tower (看山樓) and its stone cave below in the Surging Waves Pavilion (滄浪亭) in Suzhou,¹³ the openings of the stone cave were transformed into irregular shaped wall openings at the Xiangshan Campus Phase II, defining entrances, allowing sunlight to enter, and enabling elevated walkways to pass through.

13 Wang Shu, "Ziran Xingtai de Xushi yu Jihe: Ningbo Bumuguan Chuangzuo Bijì," ["The Narration and Geometry of Natural Appearance: Notes on the Design of Ningbo Historical Museum"] *Shidai Jianzhu [Time + Architecture]* 3 (2009): 69.



Fig. 3: Taihu Lake House, Xiangshan Campus Phase II, Hangzhou (2007). Photograph by Hing-wah Chau.

Meandering

“To play to the full on the hide-and-seek motif, the visitor’s movement in the puzzle would be ever so often deviated and side-tracked. But it matters little. Is it not so much more enjoyable to travel than to arrive?”¹⁴

Teaching buildings in Phase I are connected by bridges to facilitate users to walk from one building to another. Similar to wandering as a bodily movement for exploring the garden setting, the provision of circulation network in the campus facilitates spatial experience, allowing users to pass through wall openings in different profiles, to access various types of courtyards, and to touch the tactility of wall surfaces. Users can stroll from one building to another through covered walkways in all weathers for experiencing the temporality of movement and the spatial order of the overall layout.

Wang further invented a sinuous building form in Phase II with external ramps and steps on the facades in a more elaborate manner. Such three-dimensional circulation route does not only create an arresting visual impact, but also unfolds a dramatic montage of changing scenes and serve as a continuous viewing platform for diverse visual and spatial experiences to perceive the campus from various perspectives at different levels.

14 Tong, “Suzhou Gardens,” 269.



Fig. 4: Fig. 4 Teaching Building No. 11, Xiangshan Campus Phase II, Hangzhou (2007). Photograph by Hing-wah Chau.

Vistas

"No garden should be one in which from any given point the entire scenery is visible at a glance. To make possible the myriad vistas and various centres of interest, not only walks are curved, but the ground is also often irregular in contour so that vision is confined to a little at a time."¹⁵

Teaching buildings of the Xiangshan Campus sit on undulating topographical profile, which can confine vistas on ground level. Besides, similar to framing views in Chinese gardens, wall and door openings at strategic locations can offer a glimpse of beauty views behind, arousing the curiosity of visitors to continue the exploration journey.

"A garden building also functions as a vista or centre of attraction, especially when enhanced by trees, flowers or some other ornaments ... enjoy a distant view of the surrounding countryside with some landmark like a temple or a pagoda, thus being rewarded with a 'borrowed scenery'."¹⁶

Some of the teaching buildings in the campus are situated in prominent location, being as a centre of attraction. For example, Teaching Building no. 14 in Phase II is located on a water pond. The striking curvilinear roof and the water reflection on the pond serve as a visual focus. At the same time, the U-shaped profile of this building with the opening facing the small central hill can capture and borrow the distant view for users. The theme of borrowing scenery has also been applied to U-shaped teaching buildings in Phase I for establishing a dialogue between the central hill and the buildings.

¹⁵ Tong, "Suzhou Gardens," 269.

¹⁶ Tong, *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, 3-4.



Fig. 5: Teaching Building No. 14, Xiangshan Campus Phase II, Hangzhou (2007)
(Photo: Hing-wah Chau)

Conclusion

The above analysis shows that there is a strong relationship between Wang Shu's Xiangshan Campus and Tong Jun's writings on Chinese garden. Wang engages with the Chinese cultural tradition, but is not confined himself to mere imitation of the past. Instead, he expresses a persistent effort in pursuing a synthesis of cultural continuity and personal interpretation. His works provide exemplars of transforming traditional resources for new creative designs. His insightful translation of Chinese culture, his use of locally available materials, and his integration of folk craftsmanship into modern building technology are inspiring and contributing to the development of contemporary Chinese architecture.