Symbolism and Literary Reference

in Traditional Korean Gardens

Jill Matthews

There is a famous quote from a nineteenth century American missionary to Korea: “The all-round Korean will be a Confucian in society, a Buddhist when he philosophises and a spirit worshiper when he is in trouble”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such a syncretic worldview is reflected in traditional gardens surviving in 21st century Korea.

Symbolism from all the major spiritual, religious, literary and philosophical influences on Korean cultural history appear frequently in surviving traditional Korean gardens. These influences include: animism especially mountain and tree worship, shamanism, Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Chinese literature, and the Korean form of geomancy (*pungsu*). Of these by far the most significant influences are Confucianism and Buddhism. However it is almost impossible to say of any surviving traditional garden: ‘this is a purely Buddhist garden’ or ‘this is a wholly Confucian garden’. Symbols from older or confluent cultural traditions have a delightful way of infiltrating every Korean garden.

Thus in the centre of the stairway leading to the main entrance to the Dongwhasa Buddhist temple in Daegu there is a plinth displaying three rounded stones representing the three mountain gods from the older religion. Likewise there is an elegant arrangement of three rough rocks in the garden of the Hanggyo Confucian Academy also in Daegu. Nevertheless and despite their eclectic nature, understanding these symbols, and the traditions they represent, greatly enhances the enjoyment of visits to all types of Korean gardens.



Three ‘mountain gods’ at the entry to Dongwhasa Temple near Daegu

**Physical symbols in traditional Korean gardens**

Korean gardens contain many symbolic plants and literary references which will be considered below. They may also contain symbolic physical objects, structures and arrangements, which are considered here.

*Entry pathways to Buddhist temples*

Pilgrims and visitors to Buddhist temples are encouraged to approach them on foot up ritual pathways which usually meander through forests of trees such as Korean red pines. There is a particularly magnificent pathway leading to Weoljeongsa[[2]](#footnote-2) Temple in Gangwon Province[[3]](#footnote-3) which is lined with ancient Fir trees, some so large that several people would have to link arms to encircle them.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such avenues occur but usually the trees are less formally arranged in the older, more sylvan, tradition. These ritual pathways are never straight and always lead uphill, and so could be seen as a metaphor for the difficult progress towards Nirvana. Often they cross symbolically cleansing flowing water more than once, and they always pass through several gateways. The number varies from temple to temple but commonly there will be an *iljumun* or ‘one-pillar gate’, a *geumgangmun* or ‘diamond gate’ followed by a *cheonwangmun* or ‘four heavenly kings gate’. Much has been written about the significance of these gates in Buddhist cosmology[[5]](#footnote-5) but the point to grasp in relation to temple gardens is their role in marking the symbolic transition from the secular to the religious or spiritual, on the ‘path’ to enlightenment. Often they stand-alone and are not set into walls, so that it would be possible to walk around them rather than through them, which underlines their symbolic significance.

At the end of the ritual walkway there is often a tranquil reach of water crossed by an arched or rainbow-shaped bridge such as the lovely one leading into Songwangsa Temple in South Jeolla Province. Another example is the triple arched bridge crossing the sacred pond in front of the famous Bulguksa Temple in Kyeongju. It may not be too fanciful to suggest that these bridges and their reflections may be metaphors for the passage from the prosaic and ephemeral outside world into the contemplative higher realm inner world beyond. Almost always these pathways wind slowly through beautiful, peaceful woodland or forest. The whole process of walking up to a Buddhist temple is designed to be a calming meditative and mind-clearing process through a sacred landscape, and should be experienced as such.

*Gates*

In addition to the symbolic gates described on the ritual paths to Buddhist temples, wooden ceremonial gates may also be found in palace, royal burial grounds and *soewon* gardens. In royal burial grounds and *soewon* they are known as *hongsalmun* and are also stand-alone structures rather than apertures in walls.[[6]](#footnote-6) They are intended to mark the transition from the profane world to, respectively, the royal and the rarified academic realms beyond. It has been suggested that these red arrow gates could have come to Korean gardens from India[[7]](#footnote-7), either with Buddhism or by some more circuitous route. There, very similar gates, of stone, mark the transition into old Buddhist sacred areas such as Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh.

Of course in other types of gardens, ceremonial gates are set into walls and thus serve dual roles of providing security as well as symbolic transition. The gates to the Gyeongbok-gung palace and gardens in Seoul are certainly multi-purpose. Newly rebuilt, they are intended as they always were, to concentrate the *pungsu* energy of the site, to overawe visitors, and to deter potential malefactors and invaders, as well as to underline their transition from civilian to royal space.

*Lack of enclosure*

When Korean gardeners build boundary walls around their gardens they build beautiful ones, but the practice is far less common than it is in other gardening traditions. It appears that few if any royal burial grounds were ever enclosed by walls, nor are many Buddhist temples, scholarly retreat gardens or even pre-Confucian royal palace gardens. The reorganisation of society along hierarchical Confucian lines during Joseon was reflected in later garden designs. *Seowon* and palace gardens were certainly enclosed then, but even so the influence of *pungsu* on the siting of gardens and the cultivated humility of Confucian scholars meant that the building of ostentatious artificial nature-dominating gardens with high walls would have been frowned upon. Notably, the numerous scholarly retreat gardens built during Joseon are not enclosed.

One of the most profound differences between Korean and European gardening traditions, or even other Asian gardening traditions such as those of China and Japan, is this attitude to enclosure and the demarcation between gardens and their surroundings. Indeed Westerners might not even recognise some Korean gardens as gardens because of this lack of demarcation.

*Geomancy (Pungsu)*

Korean geomancy differs from Chinese *fengshui* in many respects and is far too vast a topic to be considered here.[[8]](#footnote-8) However *pungsu* principles clearly influenced site selection for almost all significant gardens in Korea. *Pungsu* considerations militate against aggressive modification of landscapes in the Western manner. The aim was to achieve gardens which were in balance and harmony with their natural surroundings and did the minimum disruption to the landscape. This emphasis on careful and appropriate site selection and environmentally friendly development could be seen as the foundation of Korean landscape design. It may in fact be one of the reasons why so many Korean gardens have survived for so long in comparison to say the gardens of the great mogul emperors in India, which usually died as soon as natural or man-made catastrophes disrupted their elaborate and expensive irrigation systems.

*Ponds*

Few Korean gardens are considered complete without at least one pond. Poems such as ‘Lotus Blossom Pond’ reproduced in *Garden Poetry* below, are evidence that garden ponds were a tradition at least 800 years ago during the Goryeo dynasty. With a few notable exceptions discussed below, most Korean garden ponds are symmetrical and geometric, commonly square or rectangular, although circular ones also exist. Unlike many ponds in Japanese and Chinese gardens, no attempt is made to naturalise them. Most have hard edges and no marginal plantings.

Lotus and water lilies are frequent decorative elements but usually constrained to small areas leaving much clear water surface. In grander gardens, ponds are often overlooked by pavilions which are particularly beautiful when reflected on the still water surface, and provide elegant venues for literary gatherings, contemplation or parties. Such pavilion ponds exist in both Changdeok-gung and Gyeongbok-gung palace gardens in Seoul.

Square ponds containing a round island are said to symbolise the Daoist idea that the earth is square but heaven is round and by extrapolation the fundamental complementarity of the universe: creative and receptive; movement and stillness; active and passive. Neo-confucianism also viewed the universe as round and the earth as square, so square ponds with a round island may also indicate the garden of a Neo-Confucian scholar or even the presence of a Confucian Academy (*seowon*). Buyongi pond in the grounds of Changdeokgung Palace in Seoul is a good example of this type of pond and it is situated right next to the building in which the Confucian civil service examinations were held during the Joseon dynasty.

Ponds containing three islands are said to symbolise the Chinese legendary three islands of paradise or alternatively, the mountainous abode of the three Korean immortals and thus the human search for immortality. Three islands may also represent the trinity of heaven, earth and man and hence be an indication of a garden in the Shaman/Daoist tradition.

What is planted on pond islands is also symbolic. Plant symbolism in general is dealt with in the next section. However the presence and number of trees on pond islands should be noted. Solitary pine trees indicate Neo-Confucian influence. Three of any sort of tree, most commonly Crape myrtles or Maples, may also symbolise the three mountain spirits and the quest for immortality. In gardens sufficiently large to have two ponds, one is frequently planted with white lotus and one with pink, the former being regarded as the more pure.

Ponds in temple gardens are intended to inspire contemplation and to mark the boundary between the sacred and the profane. An example of such a holy pond is the beautiful one in front of the Bulguksa temple in Kyeongju which reflects the two bridges leading metaphorically to the Buddhist enlightenment beyond.

Although there are exceptions to every rule, it is nevertheless generally true that symmetrical ponds, whether square, rectangular or circular, appear in Confucian style gardens, whereas more irregular naturally shaped ponds appear in Buddhist style gardens. Thus the ponds in Gyeongbok-gung and other Joseon dynasty palace gardens in Seoul are symmetrical, whereas the ponds in both the Silla and Baekche dynasty royal gardens are not symmetrical, nor as hard-edged. The oldest surviving palace pond, Gungamji, in Buyeo[[9]](#footnote-9) and Anapji pond in Gyeongju[[10]](#footnote-10) are good examples of this pre-Confucian more naturalistic style.

The ponds in Confucian scholarly retreat gardens usually have a bet each way and have both irregularly shaped and geometrical ponds. Examples of retreat gardens with both natural and rectangular ponds are the Imdaejong garden in South Jeolla province and Seon-do Yun’s garden on Bogildo Island. It may be that the custom of building scholarly retreat gardens, although only widely popularised during the neo-Confucian Joseon period, was developed on the shoulders of an older more Daoist garden design tradition in which the natural flow of water and contour of the land were disturbed as little as possible, with streams or springs dammed slightly to give irregularly shaped calm reaches of reflective water, but otherwise unimpeded.

*Levels*

The relative levels at which structures in Korean gardens are built are very significant. By observing the height of the podiums they are built on and how many steps lead up to them, it is possible to understand much about their importance. Thus in palaces, the King’s bedchamber will be higher than the Queen’s; in *seowon* the Shrine to Confucius will be higher than the scholars’ hall; in Buddhist temples the building housing the main Buddha statue will be higher than all lesser shrines and functional buildings such as dormitories and kitchens; and in *yangban* domestic garden compounds, the master’s study will be higher than the women’s quarters.

In many gardens there are individual steps (*daetol*) which are deliberately too high for normal progress, and are intended to emphasise transition from the mundane or profane world to different higher spheres such as sacred, royal, academic or masculine. *Daetol* appear at the entrance to the Master’s study in *yangban* homes, at the bottom of the normal steps leading to the King’s chamber in palaces, and outside major shrines in temples.

Dismounting stele (*hamaseok)* are found near the entrance to many gardens worthy of reverence or at least deference, including those surrounding royal or Confucian shrines, *seowon* andBuddhist temples*.* These stones originally indicated the point at which a visitor should get off his horse or out of his palanquin as a sign of respect for the teacher, deity, sage, king, or enshrined spirit within. Some suggest that the modern-day custom of getting off one’s bike or out of one’s car in order to greet an important person, such as one’s professor on a university campus, stems from this *hamseok* tradition.[[11]](#footnote-11)

*Threes*

It is remarkable how often things in Korean gardens come in threes: three islands in ponds; three trees on each island, three trees and three rocks on islands, three rocky outcrops on the banks of ponds or within view of pavilions or studies or meditation hermitages; three rocks forming tables; three rounded stones at the entrances to Buddhist temple gardens. Once you start looking, these trios are everywhere. Three has been an important number since prehistoric times in Korea as the three-stone dolmen tombs show. It seems there were three mountain gods and three sacred mountains in Korea long before the Chinese emperors sent their expeditions to seek the three mountains of immortality and possibly before the Korean progenitor Dangun was born. He certainly took up residence on one of the three existing sacred mountaintops in the company of two pre-existing mountain gods, thus making another trio.

Hence threes in Korean gardens can symbolise many things: the Chinese quest for immortality; the gods of the oldest religion; the three most sacred mountains in Korea; heaven, earth and man, and thus the essential wholeness of the universe. It all depends upon your own perspective and the context of the rest of the garden whether a particular trio is a Daoist symbol, a symbol of the old animist religion, a symbol of immortality, a graceful reference to Chinese mythology, or a reminder of the essential complementarity of the universe.

*Rocks*

Arrangements of three rocks are very common in Korean gardens and their symbolism is complex, as explained above, however arrangements of more numerous rocks also appear and have their own significance. Many gardens have twelve rocks in them somewhere, either as rocky outcrops in ponds or small rock arrangements on the shores of ponds or within view of pavilions.

Twelve-rock arrangements represent the peaks of Wu and a famous Chinese myth. Mt Wu is an actual mountain in Sichuan Province in China and it does have twelve peaks. According to one version of the myth these twelve peaks have been the abode of female immortals since the Warring States Period. The legend is that King Xiang of Chu climbed Gaotang ridge nearby to view the beautiful Mt Wu, after which he took a nap and dreamed he spent the night there with one of the female immortals, which he enjoyed greatly. As she departed next morning she told him she lived on one of the sunny peaks of Mt Wu which she shrouded in cloud each morning and to which she summoned rain every evening. Consequently, a shrine to the morning clouds was built on Mt Wu and Chinese literature abounds with references to this titillating affair.

With their deeply ingrained love of mountains it is no wonder that the Koreans have adopted the Chinese Mountain of Wu myth almost as their own. Classical Korean literature has many references to ‘the sunny side of the hill’, ‘clouds and rain’ and ‘the dream of Mt Wu’, all of which refer with varying degrees of delicacy to stimulating, even immortal, outdoor sex.

Symbolic rock arrangements abound near the Anapji Pond in the Silla royal garden in Kyongju. In the pond are three islands symbolising the three mountain spirits or their sacred mountains and the quest for immortality whilst an arrangement of twelve rocks, representing the peaks of Mount Wu, stands on one shore of the pond. Coupled with the wine cup canal at the other end of the Anapji pond, we can infer that this must have been a great venue for royal parties during the height of the Silla dynasty.

**Symbolic plants in Korean gardens**

*Revered trees*

To this day the Korean peninsula remains heavily forested and in times past, the forests covered much more territory. It is therefore not surprising that trees play an important part in Korean cosmology including the creation myth. Many villages have *dangshan* (or *seonang*) trees in their common areas which are considered to embody protective spirits. The *dangshan* tree in Yonggyi-ri near Andong is a Gingko believed to be more than 700 years old and reputed to weep whenever there is a national catastrophe. So important is this symbolic tree to the villagers that it had to be moved at a cost of 2 billion won in a process which took three years, to prevent its submergence by the construction of the Imha Hydrological dam.[[12]](#footnote-12) The 600 year-old Zelkova tree in the grounds of the Hwaseong Haenggung, the reconstructed palace within the Hwaseong Fortress at Suwon, is also such a tree. It was considered to protect the town of Suwon long before the construction of the fortress or even the original palace. Although only a single branch remains green, it is gently encircled by ropes hung with little flags and tended with the utmost care. Veneration of *dangshan* trees is clearly a very old tradition dating back to animism and pre-history and the trees themselves mostly stand alone, rather than in gardens.

However other individual venerable trees command respect simply for their longevity or historic associations. Such a tree, a gingko, grows in Husan Village in South Jeolla province and was sufficiently mature and sturdy for King Injo to have tied his horse to it when visiting the village in the early 1600’s. Probably because many Buddhist temple gardens in Korea are older than most palace gardens, revered trees are often found in temple gardens. In the grounds of Heinsa temple there is a there is a tree known as the Haksadae fir tree. It is reputed to be at least one thousand years old and commemorates the famous poet, calligrapher, administrator and general polymath, Choi Chi-won, having grown from his walking cane when he stuck it into the ground before retiring to the mountains to become a hermit. Also at Heinsa, among the avenue of trees lining the main entrance, stands an enormous dead tree trunk, the remains of an elm believed to have been planted in 802CE by King Aejang the 40th King of the Silla dynasty, to mark the establishment of Heinsa. This tree lived for over 1000 years until it died in 1945. That it has not been removed in the many decades since its death, underlines the almost sacred nature of such trees and the deeply rooted association between trees and royalty in Korean tradition.

*Pine*

The Korean red pine (*Pinus densiflora*) is the national tree of Korea and plays many symbolic roles.[[13]](#footnote-13) Its Korean name, *sonamu*, means supreme tree.[[14]](#footnote-14) Many depictions of the Korean creation myth, the story of Dangun, feature a heavenly tree whose bark at least, looks remarkably like Korean Red pine bark. This tree is one of the Ten Symbols of Longevity, *shipjangsaeng*, the others being: the sun, mountains, water, clouds, rocks/stone, mushrooms of immortality, turtles, white cranes and deer. As such it appears frequently in all forms of Korean visual art and literature and is the preferred timber from which to build royal palaces and to sculpt wooden Buddha statues. In addition it is cultivated in many types of traditional Korean gardens, especially those associated with royalty. Twisted red pines abound throughout the Piwon Secret Garden which surrounds the Changdeokgung Palace complex.

An entire forest of red pines protects the Joeson royal tomb complex in Gangnam in Seoul where they are said to symbolise the wish for longevity of the whole Joeson dynasty despite the death of individual family members of the dynasty entombed there. They were also widely cultivated in the gardens of the Buddhist Silla dynasty around Kyongju. The famous Jeongipumsong red pine tree has been growing by the roadside leading to the Beopjusa Temple in North Chungcheong province for more than 600 years. It is said that in 1464 an ailing King Sejo was being carried towards the Temple in a palanquin to seek a cure when his way was impeded by the branches of the tree. When he remonstrated, the tree immediately lifted its branches and enabled the royal party to proceed. King Sejo was so impressed by this deferential action that he granted the tree the status of administrative Senior Rank 2 on the spot.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Single red pines also grow frequently next to the main pavilions in Confucian scholarly retreat gardens where they symbolise constancy and righteousness because they remain green and do not shed their leaves in winter. Most Buddhist temple complexes include a shrine to the shaman deity, *San shin*, which literally translates as ’mountain spirit’. These stand-alone buildings (or *gak*) often have red pines planted by them and commonly house a painting of an old man invariably accompanied by a tiger and a red pine. Indeed any painting of a sage figure, male or female, whether in Buddhist or Confucian garb, when accompanied by a tiger and a Korean red pine, is almost certain to be of a *San shin* recluse who has retreated from the outside world seeking enlightenment and immortality.

*Gingko[[16]](#footnote-16)*

Gingko trees (*Gingko biloba*) are found in the gardens surrounding Confucian schools and shrines all over Korea and are plainly associated with the great sage. Pairs of gingkoes often mark the entrances to Confucian academies (*seowon*). Gingkoes are said to shoot straight and fast towards Heaven and thus to symbolise the fostering of many upright and high minded officials and their many fruits, the scholars who graduate each year.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The origin of the association of gingkoes with Confucianism is the grave of Confucius in Shandong Province in China. During the Song Dynasty in the eleventh century CE, the 45th lineal descendent of Confucius was renovating his grave which he moved slightly to enable the erection of an ‘apricot altar’ in front of it. Around this he planted many gingko trees. There is much scholarly argument about whether the original trees were gingkoes or apricots, however the fact is that today and for a very long time, gingkoes have surrounded Confucius’s grave and the trees have come to symbolise things Confucian and the achievement of probity and wisdom. Gingkoes are also planted in both private and palace gardens to remind visitors of the virtues of the great teacher. Seen in this light the current choice for new tree plantings throughout the streets of Seoul of thousands of gingkoes, may be more than just a pragmatic choice related to the ability of these trees to withstand modern day pollution.

A spectacular pair of gingko trees mark the entrance to the oldest and highest Confucian school and shrine in Korea which is known variously as Seoul Confucian Shrine, Munmyo Confucian Shrine, Seonggyungwan National Confucian Academy. This whole complex, is now a part of Sungkyunkwan University, itself the oldest in Korea. These gingkoes are designated Natural monument number 59. Planted in 1519AD, they are approaching their five hundredth year. One of the pair was badly damaged during the sacking of the shrine complex by the Japanese in 1592 and is celebrated as much for its resilience as its longevity: it now possesses seven branches, each as thick as the main trunk, which grew from the site of the injury.

*Lotus[[18]](#footnote-18)*

The sacred lotus *(Nelumbo nucifera*) is the most contentious of the symbolic plants commonly found in Korean gardens. Widely regarded as a Buddhist plant, the lotus grown in Korean gardens may indeed have originated in India and travelled to Korea with Buddhism itself. However today the lotus occurs more frequently in temple decoration than in temple gardens, few of which have ponds appropriate for lotus cultivation. Moreover lotuses were also frequently planted in Confucian gardens including scholarly retreat, royal pleasure, shrine and *soewon* gardens for hundreds of years, continuing until the present day. It is therefore a matter for regret that misguided agitation by 20th century Korean Christians forced the removal of all lotuses from both Hyangwonjeong and the Gyeonghoeru pavilion ponds in the Gyeongbokgung palace, on the spurious basis that they were ‘Buddhist’ flowers.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The symbolism of the plant is obvious, not only to Buddhists and Confucians: so much purity arising from so much dirt and mud. Every part of the plant is useful and the bloom a culmination of enlightenment.

*Bamboo*

Another symbolic plant which appears frequently in Korean gardens is the bamboo. It is regarded as a metaphor for uprightness, strength and resilience because it may bow before a storm but rises again unbroken. Its hollow stems are said to indicate open-mindedness.

*Persimmon*

Persimmon trees are widely cultivated in Korean gardens for their fruit and their seasonal beauty as well as their symbolism. After a dazzling display of autumn foliage, persimmons lose their leaves but hold their brilliant orange fruits through many of the colder months. The sight of frost- or snow-limned persimmon branches with the fruit still tenaciously hanging from them is very beautiful. Because their fruit starts off hard, green and extremely bitter, but ripens to a bright orange and becomes very soft and sweet, persimmons are regarded as a symbol for transformation. As such, persimmons appear frequently in Buddhist temple gardens and both the fruit and the quadripartite calyx are often included in the wooden carvings and paintings in temple buildings.

**Literary references**

Before 1443 when Hangeul was invented, the primary means of written communication in Korea was Classical Chinese. For many centuries it performed a similar role to that of Latin in Medieval Europe. Indeed it remained Korea’s literary and administrative language until the start of the twentieth century. This is why most inscriptions, calligraphy and poetry found in Korean gardens to this day, are in Chinese characters. These Chinese texts in Korean gardens are part of an elaborate and erudite game which allows people educated in this tradition to appreciate the gardens at a different, intellectual, level in addition to that of mere aesthetic pleasure. For example in the Soswaewon garden in South Jeolla province, there is a pavilion with a name-plate in Chinese characters which means ‘Pavilion for Awaiting the Phoenix’. Visitors schooled in Chinese calligraphy and mythology would immediately realise the significance of the plantings which surround it: bamboo, reputedly the favourite food of the phoenix, and Paulownia trees, the favourite nesting place of these mythical creatures. Thus the whole garden can be read as a metaphor for Daoist ideas concerning the quest for immortality. Sadly fewer and fewer young Koreans learn classical Chinese these days so they are unable to appreciate such references unassisted and thus their significance is slowly being lost.

In 1590 Gwon Munhae, an official in the Court of King Seonjo, produced a 20 volume literary encyclopaedia for authors, the *Daedong unbu gunok (A Korean Guide for Writers).* It comprised mostly rhyming couplets arranged by topics such as – geography, names of kingdoms, family names and lineages, filial sons, chaste women, official titles, immortals, actual names associated with pen names, names of flowers, names of animals and so forth. It was inspired by a dictionary of rhyming phrases written by a Chinese scholar of the Yuan dynasty around 1270 but Gwon’s work was a distillation of centuries of earlier Korean works and covered every Korean dynasty from the mythical founder Dangun up to his own day in the early Joseon era. What a resource for aristocratic Korean garden-builders searching for a perfect name for a garden or pavilion or inspiration for a piece of garden poetry!

Gwon Munhae lived and worked only shortly after William Shakespeare, yet he was accessing and systematising a literary tradition which already stretched back at least two thousand years. Another astonishing thing about his *Daedong unbu gunok* was that it was not published until two hundred years after his death. In 1798, Gwon’s seventh generation lineal descendent published it, printed from woodblocks which are still retained in his ancestral village Jungnim-ri by the current head of his lineage.

In addition to writing this extraordinary work, Gwon Munhae also built a garden in his home village with a pavilion entitled *Choganjeong* (Studying at a Bend in a Stream). It must have taken such an erudite man a long time to select the title for his own pavilion. This pavilion was burnt down once by the Japanese in 1592, and once later, and required a major restoration in the nineteenth century. Each time, it was rebuilt or restored by his faithful descendants and still can be visited. It is an example without parallel of steadfast filial dedication and literary continuity in any other culture.

*Garden poetry*

Many old garden pavilions are hung with wooden plates into which poetry has been carved in fine calligraphy of various styles. Especially in scholarly retreat gardens it was customary for the owners to invite guests to write poems inspired by their experience of the gardens. Even in translation, such Korean garden poetry has an elegant sparseness and brevity, often reading more like an aphorism or a haiku than a sonnet or a narrative epic. It also displays acute and detailed observations of nature, as one would expect from authors who spent much time sitting in open garden pavilions in beautiful surroundings with superb views to mountains and water.

‘Lotus Blossom Pond’ is a beautiful example of such garden poetry.[[20]](#footnote-20) As it appears in the Collected Works of Minister Yi of Korea by Yi Gubyo (1168-1241AD), it must be almost eight hundred years old:

*A lonely bird flies into a pond*

*Cutting through the water as though it were a piece of blue silk cloth.*

*A small wave ripples through the water in that square pond*

*Causing the lotus flowers on the surface to sway.*

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Garden poetry in Imdaejeong pavilion in South Jeolla

An example of the close relationship between gardens, literature and poetry is Imdaejeong Pavilion Garden in South Jeolla province. The name of the garden itself comes from a Chinese poem entitled ‘Sitting Riverside Looking at Water, Thinking of Mountain’ by the Song Dynasty poet Yeomgye. Still today the pavilion in this garden is hung with several wooden plates engraved with nature poems in Chinese characters.

*The Four Friends*

Jeong Yeongbang who built the scholarly retreat garden Seoseokji Pond in North Gyeongsang province, included an elevated terrace overlooking a pond with a rock named – A Platform for Four Old Friends. There he wrote the following poem:

*Plum and chrysanthemum stand out in a snow-covered landscape*

*Pine and bamboo give nature colour after frost*

*With pine, bamboo, plum and chrysanthemum as my friends in winter*

*I will have companions as long as I live.[[21]](#footnote-21)*

These ‘four friends’ – plum, chrysanthemum, bamboo and pine –continue to grow in his garden three hundred years later. Yeong Yeonbang was not the first man of letters to group these plants together because of what they symbolise. Many earlier Chinese poems and paintings had done so. In fact Korean gardens share many symbolic plants with Chinese gardens because of their common literary and artistic heritage.[[22]](#footnote-22) Both Korean and Chinese poetry contain many references to plum blossom, chrysanthemums, pine and bamboo, and also to juniper trees, peonies, orchids among others. Gardens containing them should be considered as the embodiments of the virtues long associated with them.

The strong literary associations with many specific plants can be argued to have restricted the planting palette in Chinese gardens, where the diversity of plants cultivated is much less than the array of wild plants available to Chinese horticulturists. It took numerous excursions by European plant hunters to collect and promulgate many Chinese wild plants.[[23]](#footnote-23) This does not seem to have occurred in Korean gardens where, in addition to the accepted group of plants with widely understood symbolism, a plethora of other plants have always been grown simply for their aesthetic appeal. Surprisingly this is particularly so in Buddhist temple gardens which often maintain flower terraces (*hwagye*) filled with diverse ebullient multi-coloured plantings of annuals and biennials such as Evening Primroses, Hydrangeas, Cosmos, Day Lilies, Grannies Bonnets, Pinks, Iris, various Daisies and Narcissus, Peonies, Azaleas, Cosmos and White Clover. The main object of the selection of plants in these flower terraces seems to be to emphasise the changing of the seasons and perhaps to re-enact the birth/life/death cycle. It has been suggested that the practice may be a consequence of the arrival of Daoism in Korea at roughly the same time as Buddhism was becoming established on the peninsula. The essentially transient and cyclical nature of the bedding plants in the *hwagye*, is reinforced by the choice of shrubs and small trees within the temple grounds. Crape Myrtles, Viburnums, Plums, Magnolias and Maples are common, all famed for their seasonal glories. Tongdosa temple garden even features several Banana trees in one of its gardens. These must die back each winter in such a harsh climate and need to re-grow each spring.

**Conclusion**

The Western attitude to gardens is extremely different from the Korean attitude. For example many Koreans might not consider the landscaped Joseon royal burial grounds to be ‘gardens’, but Westerners familiar with English landscape traditions certainly would. On the other hand, many Westerners would consider that a clear demarcation between ‘garden’ and ‘outside the garden’ by walls or fences to be essential to the very concept of garden. Therefore they might not consider pavilion pond gardens, open on all sides to the surrounding forest or agricultural fields as they often are, to be real gardens, whereas these delightful places are clearly understood to be gardens by Koreans.

Despite these different mental frameworks Western visitors to Korean gardens will find their appreciation of distinctiveness and significance of these gardens will be greatly enhanced if they visit being already aware of the layers of symbolism and literary reference embedded within them.

**Further Reading in English**

Min, Kyung-hyun, *Korean Gardens* (Borim, Seoul, Korea 1992) This book, sadly out of print, is a history of Korean gardens compiled from literary and painting records and the results of the author’s own archaeological excavations and observations.

Heo, Kyun, *Gardens of Korea – Harmony With Intellect and Nature*, (Saffron Korea Library, London, 2005) A wonderful book which describes and explains many existing gardens in detail illustrated with colour photographs.

Korean National Arboretum, *Traditional Korean Gardens – Representative Gardens of the Joseon Period,* (Korean National Arboretum, 2012). A beautifully illustrated survey of 26 major gardens with emphasis on identification of the trees therein.

Chun, Young Woo, *Forests and Korean Culture*, (English version, Bookshill, Seoul, Korea 2010, Korean version, Soomoon Publishers, Seoul, Korea 1999). Passionate examination of all aspects of trees in Korean culture from their role in the creation myth to modern sustainability and pollution issues with many insights into Korean gardens along the way.

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Jill Matthews BA LLB (USyd) Dip. Hort. (Landscape Design) (Hons) is the Principal Designer of Greenleaf Garden Design, a Research Member of the Korean Research Institute at the University of New South Wales and a Member of the Australian Institute of landscape Designers & managers (AILDM).

1. Homer B. Hulbert quoted in Daniel Tudor, *Korea: the Impossible Country* (Tuttle 2013) ch. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Non-Korean speaking visitors to Korean gardens can learn a lot from the suffixes ending place names. For example the ‘sa’ at the end of ‘Weoljeongsa’ indicates a temple. Similarly the suffix ‘jeong’ or ‘jeongja’ indicates a pavilion; ‘neung’, the tomb of a king or queen; ‘myo’, the tomb of princes or princesses of the queen or concubines; ‘won’, the tomb of the Crown prince, his wife or their son; ‘san’ a mountain; ‘gung’, a palace; ‘mun’, a gate; ‘buk’, north, ‘nam’ south. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This English convention for the names for provinces is used herein. eg South Jeolla Province, however the alternative convention should be noted by which this province would be named Jeollanam-do where the suffix ‘nam’ means south and ‘do’ means province. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yoo, Myeong-jong, *Temples of Korea* (Discovery Media, 2009) p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example *Temple Architecture (*Dale’s Temple Adventures at http://koreantemples.com/?page\_id=579*).* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lee Byeongyu, *Visits to the Kings – Guidebook of Royal Tombs of the Joseon Dynasty* (GeoMarketing, 2008) p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tom Turner, *Asian Gardens – History, Beliefs and Design* (Routledge, 2011) p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an exhaustive discussion see Hong-Key Yoon, *The Culture of Fengshui in Korea* (Lexington Books, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gunamji pond in the Baekche royal pleasure garden was built in CE 634. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Anapji pond in the Silla royal pleasure garden was built in CE 674. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lee, Sang-hae, *Seowon – The Architecture of Korea’s Private Academies* (Hollym, 2005) p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Chun, Young Woo, *Forests and Korean Culture* (English version, Bookshill, Seoul, Korea 2010, Korean version, Soomoon Publishers, Seoul, Korea 1999)p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is probably endemic to both Japan and the Korean peninsula and adjacent parts of China. The same tree is known as Japanese red pine in Japan where it does not seem to have been invested with the same symbolic significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Chun, Young Woo, *Forests and Korean Culture,* p. 205*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Yoo, Myeong-jong, *Temples of Korea*, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For an exhaustive examination of the Gingko, its history and cultural significance see Peter Crane, *Gingko* (Yale University Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lee, Sang-hae, *Seowon*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For an exhaustive examination of the Lotus, its history and cultural significance see Mark Griffiths, *The Lotus Quest – in Search of the Sacred Flower* (Chatto & Windus 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Heo Kyun, Gardens of Korea – Harmony with Intellect and Nature (Saffron, 2005) p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Heo Kyun, *Gardens of Korea – Harmony With Intellect and Nature*, p. 45 (Saffron Korea Library, London, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Heo Kyun, *Gardens of Korea, p. 103.* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For an examination of symbolic plants in Chinese visual art and literature see Peter Valder, *The Garden Plants of China*, particularly p. 47 and following (Florilegium, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Jane Kirkpatrick, *Gifts From the Gardens of China* (Frances Lincoln, 2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)