

# The Chinese Garden

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the Chinese garden. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the appearance of Chinese gardens by comparing them to Western gardens, and identify examples of Chinese gardens. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

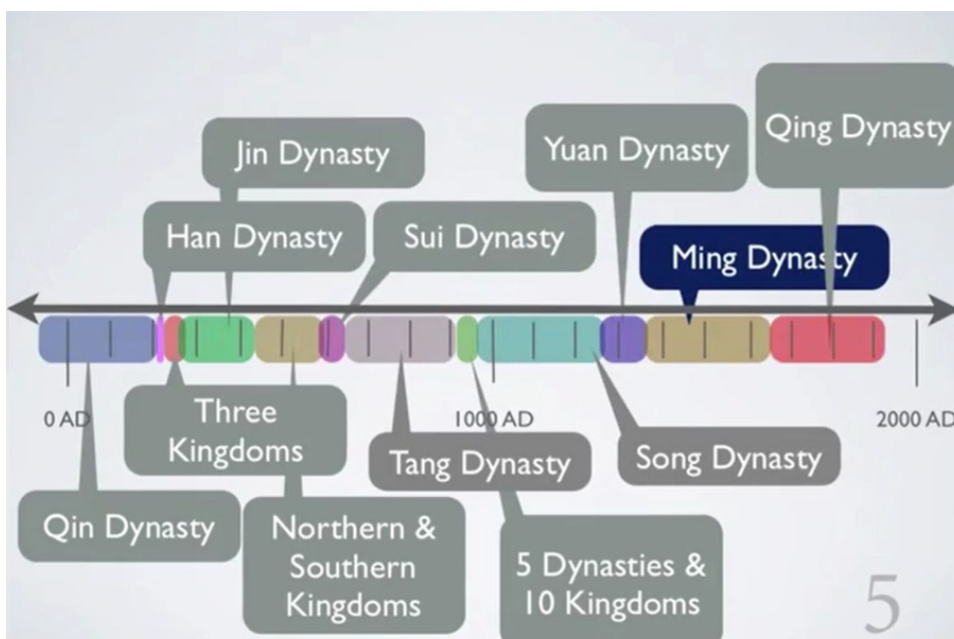


### BIG IDEA

Chinese gardens explore opposing forces of yin & yang; the male force of rock countered by the female energy of water.

## 1. Period and Location: The Chinese Garden

This lesson covers a time period known as the Ming Dynasty. The history of China is broken up into dynasties in which one familial line had a succession of rulers. The gardens that you will be looking at today date from the 16th century, but have been altered throughout the many years as they've changed ownership. These gardens are located in Suzhou, China.



## 2. Examples of Chinese Gardens

Chinese gardens such as the following examples were retreats for high-ranking officials or the wealthy. These wouldn't have been accessible to the average person. It's important to point out the influence of Taoism at this time, specifically with how it relates to the design of these gardens. **Taoism** taught that humans were intimately connected to all aspects of nature. Gardens were a way of bringing people closer to the forces of the universe, both spiritually and materialistically.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Taoism**

A philosophical and religious tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao, meaning “way,” “path,” or “principle”.

## **2a. Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets**

Notice how this garden, titled the “Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets”, differs from the typical Western-style garden, particularly the designs of places such as Versailles in France and English-style gardens that emulated Versailles.



**Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets (also known as Wangshi Yuan)**

**16th century**

**Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China**

In Chinese gardens, there is a distinct lack of interest in flowering plants. They use plants, but they are typically sparse and leafy, such as bamboo. They were designed around the concept of **sa-lo-kwai-chi**, or the quality of being impressive or surprising through careless or disorderly grace. Essentially, what this boils down to is an intentional effort to appear disorderly. It's important to remember that these gardens are not natural occurrences. They are contrived in a way that emphasizes the lack of order in nature while at the same time creating a state of harmony with the forces of nature.



#### TERM TO KNOW

## 2b. Lingerin Garden

It isn't as apparent as it is in Western-style gardens, but these are carefully designed works of art, with the elements arranged in a way that maximizes the flow of energy—a practice called **feng shui**. Chinese gardens explore the idea of the balance of opposing forces of **yin & yang**, such as the male force of rock balanced by the female energy of water.

Rocks in particular were very important components of Chinese gardens. These gardens use irregularly shaped rocks from nearby Lake Tai. To emphasize the idea of careless or disorderly grace, artists and craftsmen would actually shape the already irregularly shaped **Lake Tai rocks** to appear even more irregular. It's an interesting example of organized disorder. The intended appearance is the result of very careful, deliberate planning, not unlike the attempts of Renaissance artists, for example, to hide strokes of their paintbrushes so that the overall effect was more naturalistic.



### DID YOU KNOW

The Chinese thought that these rocks embodied irrational forces that could be brought under control by their strategic placement within the gardens and the placement of other elements within the garden.



Lingerin Garden (also known as Liu Yuan)

16th century

Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China



### THINK ABOUT IT



How do the gardens above compare with Western gardens, such as those of Versailles, shown below? The contrast with the overt geometry and restraint of nature found in Western gardens is easily identifiable.



**Gardens of Versailles**

**17th century**

**Versailles, France**

However, in both cases, the gardens represent the adaption of nature to a human ideal, and provided an environment where people could reflect and relax in the peace of the outdoors.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Feng Shui**

A Chinese practice in which the elements of a space are arranged in a way that maximizes the flow of energy.

##### **Yin & Yang**

Contrary yet interconnected and interdependent forces in the natural world.

##### **Lake Tai Rocks**

Stones from a large, freshwater lake in Eastern China thought to have formed as the result of a meteor impact 70 million years ago.



## SUMMARY

Today you learned about **the Chinese garden**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms. You also learned how to identify **examples of Chinese gardens** by examining the appearance of two Chinese gardens from the 16th century, and comparing them to Western gardens. In particular, you learned that Chinese gardens explore the opposing forces of yin & yang, the male force of rock countered by the female energy of water.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Feng Shui**

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### **Lake Tai Rocks**

Stones from a large freshwater lake in Eastern China thought to have formed as the result of a meteor impact 70 million years ago.

### **Sa-lo-kwai-chi**

The quality of being impressive through disorderly grace.

### **Taoism**

A philosophical and religious tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao meaning 'way', 'path' or 'principle'.

### **Yin & Yang**

Contrary, yet interconnected and interdependent forces in the natural world.