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Cross-Cultural Comparisons between the Mughal Tomb Garden of Taj Mahal in Agra (India) and the Dry Landscape Garden of the Ryoan-Ji Zen Monastery in Kyoto (Japan)

An Analysis of Cultural and Religious Layers of Meaning in Two Cases of Classical Garden Landscape Architecture

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Abstract

Gardens have always meant a lot to people. Gardens are as much about nature as they are about culture. The extent to which gardens carry and embody both similar and different layers of meaning will be demonstrated by comparing two classical gardens, the Taj Mahal tomb garden of the Mughal rulers in Agra, India, and the Ryoan-ji dry landscape garden of the Zen monks in Kyoto, Japan. Parallels will be drawn by offering a (diachronic) analysis of the historical accumulation of layers of meaning associated with each one of these two gardens, and (synchronic) structural comparisons will be drawn by raising two thematic issues in particular, the inside-outside relationship and the nature-culture relationship. The roles that Islam and Zen Buddhism play in the religious meaning making of these two classical gardens turn out to be strikingly similar, in that they confirm rather than transform other layers of cultural meaning.

Keywords

landscape architecture – nature-culture – Zen garden – Mughal garden – Taj Mahal – Ryoan-ji – landscape garden – tomb garden

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Introduction

Gardens have always meant a lot to people. But how exactly are gardens meaningful? In what respects and to what extent are gardens charged with meaning, from one culture to the other and from one period to the next? In classical formal gardens, a whole range of meanings associated with gardens in the past comes to the surface. This paper suggests that this range of meanings is neither infinite nor arbitrary. Certain patterns of meaning persist and allow for variation. The extent to which gardens carry and embody both similar and different meanings will be demonstrated by comparing two classical gardens, the Taj Mahal tomb garden of the Mughal rulers in Agra, India, and the Ryoan-ji dry landscape garden of the Zen monks in Kyoto, Japan. More specifically, the paper will focus on the role of Islam and Zen Buddhism respectively. The guiding question of this article is: Have these religions played a role in either confirming or transforming other layers of cultural meaning of these gardens?

In terms of methodology, cross-cultural comparisons are full of pitfalls. The choice of these two gardens, for example, is meant to be representative of their respective traditions but there is always an element of arbitrariness about such choices. But comparisons may generate new insights if the juxtaposition creates sufficient distance to perceive patterns of difference and similarity on both sides of the tension between the two poles of the comparison that would otherwise have remained unnoticed. There are, of course, many ways in which these gardens could be compared without simplifying their complexity but this paper will limit itself to a combination of two analyses: one diachronic, one synchronic. Parallels will be drawn by offering a (diachronic) analysis of the historical accumulation of layers of meaning associated with each one of these two gardens, in part 1 for the Taj Mahal garden, in part 2 for the Ryoan-ji garden, respectively. Structural comparisons will be drawn by raising two thematic issues in particular (synchronic), the inside-outside relationship and the nature-culture relationship, in part 3. The role of religious meaning making will be addressed specifically in the conclusion.

Part 1 The Mughal Taj Mahal Garden

1.1 *Introduction*

India's most famous monument is not a Hindu temple but a Muslim mausoleum: the Taj Mahal at Agra. Less well-known is the garden in front of it whose extended grid squares may be overlooked since the eye-catching tomb itself stands on a raised marble platform along the Yamuna river bank. Yet, the

tomb is located inside this walled garden and is therefore an integral part of the garden. This garden included a flower garden abounding in aromatic herbs and fruit-bearing trees. (Begley 1996: 220–221) The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan had the Taj Mahal tomb complex built as a memorial to his wife Mumtaz Mahal after her death in 1631. One would expect the tomb to be located at the very centre of the quadripartite garden but, unlike its predecessors, the tomb is placed at one end of the garden, on the river side of the walled complex. Within the enclosure, the four-part garden with one water tank in the middle connects the gateway with the tomb along the north-south axis water channels, and connects two pavilions along the east-west axis water channels, thus creating a monumental view in all directions. A grid technique is very likely to have been used for laying out the overall design. (Barraud 2012: 108–113)

Several traditions have left their mark on the layout and meaning of this Mughal garden. This is because the Mughal dynasty itself (1526–1858) was rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of its Turkish founder Zahir-ud-din Muhammad, better known as Babur ('Tiger'), who had been equally impressed with Persian culture and the martial spirit of his northern adversaries, the Usbegs to whom he lost his patrimony Samarkand. Babur wrote Persian poems, and he successfully used Usbeg strategies of cavalry warfare as well as Turkish artillery. He conquered Afghanistan before moving, in the footsteps of his Mongol ancestor Timur, into India and defeating the sultan of Delhi in 1526. (Kulke and Rothermund 1999: 184–197; Keay 2001: 289–347) Persian, Islamic, Turco-Mogol, and Delhi garden traditions will all be addressed here.

1.2 *The Persian Garden Tradition*

The Persian garden tradition was the first to leave its mark on the Taj Mahal garden. Already in the sixth century BCE, in the layout of the palaces and gardens of Cyrus the Great (559–530 BCE) at his capital Pasargadae, the Persian garden was to be enjoyed from the raised platform of buildings, from garden pavilions and palace galleries, for its view, fresh air, smell, and sound of birds, in the shade of porticos during the hours of relentless heat. The Persian garden was for shaded sitting, watching, and breathing, not for walking, strolling, or camping. (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 71–72; Moynihan 1982: 17, 20) The close relationship between buildings and gardens implies a close connection between interior and exterior. Persian gardens were not for hunting. The early Caliphs would also build palaces as hunting lodges, and the hunting grounds would be nearby but separate from the gardens. (Moynihan 1982: 41)

A second feature of Persian gardens is that they are separated by walls, enclosed. The very word 'paradise' derives from the Greek mercenaries' ren-

dition (Xenophon reports its use in 401 BCE) of the Avestan word for 'walled garden', *pairidaeza*, which simply means 'a wall (*daeza*) around (*pairi*)'. (Moynihan 1982: 1) Persian gardens were enclosed spaces. In this respect, there was a clear disconnection between interior and exterior. One should distinguish between large-scale and small-scale gardens, though. With the advent of the Saljuqs, one word for 'garden', *bagh*, was used to denote an entity comprising garden and palace. (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 75) The word *bagh* had a residential connotation, referring to a 'park' or 'estate' but never to a 'hunting park' or 'deer park'. Hunting grounds were always covered by a different term, *shikarghah*. Besides this large-scale walled garden containing the palace or pavilion, there would also be the inner court garden contained within the palace. (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 85)

A third feature of the formal Persian garden was its canal, a stone watercourse with stone pools at regular intervals, or its pool. (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 73; Moynihan 1982: 19–21) This feature is crucial to one's understanding of the origin of the Persian garden in agriculture based on irrigation. Persian agriculture practices both irrigated and dry farming, depending on the amount of rainfall. The Iranian plateau is not an auspicious place for gardens at all, given the amount of rainfall. (Moynihan 1982: 14) "Agriculture in Persia was from earliest times regarded as the fundamental basis of the prosperity of the country," A.K.S. Lambton (1965: 902–903) writes. He continues: "The Avesta was unequivocal in its approval of the settled life of the peasant and of the practice of agriculture. Agricultural prosperity, which was also in Islamic times traditionally regarded as the basis upon which stable government rested, was closely connected with irrigation, security, and taxation. Rulers were urged by mediaeval Islamic theorists to foster agriculture in order to ensure a full treasury and thus prevent the decay of the kingdom. To this end irrigation works were to be carried out, security established, and extortion against the peasantry prevented." Irrigation has the purpose of turning a hostile nature into well-cared-for culture. As a consequence, nature is perceived as either inhospitable or fruit-bearing if transformed into (agri)culture. If properly cultivated, nature carries the potential of being made into a crop-producing pleasure garden. Later botanical gardens would continue this dual function and meaning of nature as enjoyable and exploitable. (cf. also Fairchild Ruggles 2008: 17)

A consequence of the practical necessity of applying irrigation was that the layout and subdivisions of a garden depended on the best ways to distribute the irrigated water. One solution was the so-called 'four-part garden' (*chahar bagh*). D. Fairchild Ruggles (2008: 43) writes: "On the practical level, the four-part cross-axial plan was adopted for palatine gardens because, just as in the agricultural landscape, it provided a sensible means of irrigation. Water was

typically introduced from a single source such as the endpoint of an aqueduct, a reservoir or water-lifting apparatus, and distributed into a network of canals that reached the four quadrants." Such garden divisions were arranged in Persia and the Mediterranean long before they would become a characteristic of many Islamic gardens. The Timurids would adapt and perfect the quadripartite garden concept to a high degree. (Subtelny 1997: 110–128)

In Persia, the tradition of cultivating a (small-scale) garden was not exclusively aristocratic. (Moynihan 1982: 11, 20) But the combination of large-scale gardens and irrigation was associated with royal power. The Umayyads would use the display of water in their garden fountains as a conspicuous symbol of their power to control the land. (Fairchild Ruggles 2008: 26) And the cross-axial garden would become a powerful symbol of territory, possession, and sovereign rule: "The sovereign sat in a central location, either in the middle of the garden or overlooking its primary axis, and looked across the meticulously gardened space, much as a landowner supervised the cultivated fields." (Fairchild Ruggles 2008: 48) The Mughal rulers would revitalize the association of garden symmetry with royal power. John F. Richards (1996: 261) writes: "For Babur, and for his successors, the formal symmetry of the imperial garden imposed order over the disorderly, dusty, landscape of India. Just as the physical landscape was disciplined by the emperor, so was society. The garden and the emperor as gardener was a stock Mughal rhetorical device."

1.3 *The Islamic Paradise Garden Tradition*

The second garden tradition to leave its mark was Islamic paradise imagery. The Qur'an contains many references to the heavenly afterworld (the 'Garden', *al-janna*, and 'Paradise', *al-firdaws*, as opposed to the 'Fire' of Hell) in terms of a garden or a landscape of gardens. These references are not just scattered throughout the Qur'an but they also do not allow for a fully systematically consistent and complete picture. Certain aspects, however, reoccur and dominate. Their underlying principle is the imaginative transplantation of earthly natural landscapes and worldly social relationships into heavenly versions of these conditions. The afterworld has a material and social structure that is similar to the structure of the earthly world but far exceeds its pleasures and pains. (Rustomji 2013: 21–22, 50, 64)

The walled Garden of Paradise is a place of purity, pleasure, and opulence, and therefore its building and natural materials include gold, silver and jewels, and the rivers flowing underneath the gardens are of water, milk, wine and honey. (Qur'an 47.16–17) There are silk cushions and carpets of rich brocades, untouched women, beautiful servants, shade, abundance of fruit, pomegranates and dates. (Qur'an 55, 76) Large families live in opulent residences, either

in (nomadic) tents with space for privacy, or in (urban) pavilions with heightened luxury. (Rustomji 2013: 87–89) There are markets, not for commercial but for social exchange and food supply.

Access to and hierarchy within the Garden depends on current moral behavior, religious beliefs and future divine forgiveness, less on gender, hardly on social status, and not on blood ties. (Rustomji 2013: 57, 90) Different categories of people enter through different gates and reach different levels within the Garden. This aspect was elaborated in the later traditions that often mention eight gates and eight levels. (Schimmel 1976: 21; Rustomji 2013: 115–117)

The layout of the Garden springs from an *axis mundi*, a physical centre of the universe such as, in neighboring religions, the first mountain, or the sacred tree, or the water source from which four rivers flow in the four cardinal directions, thus constituting a four-part garden. The Hebrew Bible (Genesis 2.4b–23), in particular, comes to mind with its garden in Eden, the Sumerian word for 'plain' or 'steppe'. (Sproul 1979: 125–126) In the Qur'an (53.14–20), the Lote Tree of the Boundary is located on one end of the Garden near the Garden of the Abode next to God's throne. (Rustomji 2013: 68, 116) Trees are fragrant, and the landscape itself is structured by smell and composed of perfume or spices. Animals are absent. (Rustomji 2013: 70–73)

The kind of pleasure garden depicted in the Qur'an was clearly unavailable in the local setting of the Prophet. There is not even one single river on the Arabian peninsula. The imagery of gardens, castles and precious materials in the Hebrew Bible and Qur'an recalled and drew from the urban conditions of Persia, Syria and Iraq, that is to say, offered respite from the harsh material realities of the Arabian peninsula. Moreover, the visionary Garden prospect was a major consolation and reward for current trials of Muhammad's companions, afterworld imagery contested by Muhammad's opponents who had not inherited a belief in any afterlife to start with. (Rustomji 2013: 9–20, 67) By the time the early Muslim Arabs conquered Persia, they considered in turn the actual Persian garden the earthly counterpart and foretaste of the promised Qur'anic Paradise.

From an Islamic point of view, nature is God's creation and as such a sign of the universal order, plan, promise, and power of its Creator. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993: 6–7), striking a slightly orientalistic but no less theological note, writes: "The pre-Islamic Arabs to whom the Quran was first addressed had a great love for Nature and like all the nomads who wander endlessly in the great expanses of virgin Nature had a deep intuition of the presence of the Invisible in the visible. Islam, which has always preserved the form of the spirituality of Semitic nomads, emphasized this particular trait of the nomadic spirit and made of Nature in Islam a vast garden in which the handiwork of

the invisible gardener is ever present." The Qur'an often calls nature a 'book of nature' that is to be read as full of 'verses' or 'signs' (the same word *ayat*), of creation referring to its Creator. The acceptance of the one God as the only source of all moral values (*tawhid*) includes the moral value of nature as man's reliable testing ground, a realm that has been created both orderly and knowable. Ziauddin Sardar (1984: 156–157) points out that "both the orderliness of nature and its amenability to rational enquiry are essential for morality," since God has entrusted man with being the custodian of nature on His behalf, as His steward and deputy. Nature is entrusted to man and is a moral testing ground, ultimately under God's moral control.

These theological connotations of nature are felt even more intensely when nature is turned into a garden. The symmetry of the garden is meant to visualize the divine order embedded in nature. Jonas Lehrman (1980: 46) notes: "Indeed, within the plants themselves there is also an inherent geometry: in the flower heads, in the individual petals and in the veins of leaves. Apart from very slight modification due to wind, heat, cold and factors of a similar nature that affected the plant during its growth, all parts are balanced. This was not lost on the Muslim. Yet remarkably, although there is similarity in design, there is no uniformity. The Islamic garden still reflects a spirit based on the individual organic growth of its various natural components." And Elizabeth B. Moynihan (1982: 39) writes: "The space of the Persian garden, as precisely defined by its water course, reflected the cosmic order of an ordered universe which existed according to divine law. (..) Within the protective walls of a garden, in the privacy of a man-made paradisal oasis, the sensual pleasures could be enjoyed—a foretaste of the promised eternal Paradise. (..) within its walls the transformation of barren earth into fruitful orchards through water was evidence of God's power of creation." Annemarie Schimmel (1976: 25) points out that in Persian lyrical and epic poems and in Turkish mystic literature, the trees bending for God and the flowers and birds praising God by their colour, scent, and shape, are involved not just in the recollection of God but in ritual prayer.

The architecture of the Taj Mahal expresses strict geometry, symmetrical planning and a hierarchical grading of materials, forms and colours down to the most minute ornamental detail, from red sandstone to white marble, from geometric design to floral design. (Koch 2012: 104–105) Muslim rulers had a long tradition of expressing their power and status through architecture and the arts but Shah Jahan stands out for thus expressing "his specific state ideology—that centralized authority and hierarchy bring about balance and harmony." (Koch 2012: 84) The colour symbolism of red sandstone and white marble, Ebba Koch (2012: 215–217) explains, has both Islamic and Hindu meaning. It is hierarchically graded: white is reserved for the most important elements. White has

strong Islamic connotations with purity, goodness, spirituality, and the afterlife, whereas red is more earthly. White has Hindu connotations with priestly brahmins, red with ruling warriors. "The synthesis of the two colours," Koch (2012: 215) writes, "had an auspicious connotation. By using white and red in their buildings the Mughals identified themselves with the two highest levels of the Indian social system."

Access to the Taj Mahal tomb garden is marked by the gateway inscription of Qur'anic verses that explicitly refer to the Day of Judgment and God's invitation to enter the garden of Paradise (Qur'an 89). (Koch 2012: 128, 225) Wayne E. Begley recalls that there had been a long-established convention to metaphorically equate any beautiful garden, particularly a quadripartite garden, with the garden of Paradise but suggests that, in the Taj Mahal case, nothing less than a precise replica of Paradise was intended. He argues that "the innovative layout of the architect Ustad Ahmad Lahore was probably inspired by then well-known cosmological diagrams depicting the garden of paradise on the Day of Judgment." (Begley 1996: 216, 225) The four water channels must symbolize the four flowing rivers of Paradise, the water tank the celestial Kausar Tank of Abundance, where the Prophet will stand on the Day of Judgment to intercede for the faithful.

Begley also draws support from Ibn al-Arabi's visually detailed diagram of the Plain of Assembly to suggest that the Taj tomb was intended as a symbolic replica of God's throne. (Begley 1996: 228–231) Fairchild Ruggles, on the other hand, stresses that an exclusively religious explanation does not cover all aspects and that the Qur'anic inscriptions "explain neither the unusual position of the tomb in the garden nor the relationship of the Taj complex to the pleasure garden on the river's opposite bank." (Fairchild Ruggles 2008: x) Koch (2012: 225, 250) rejects Begley's Throne of God hypothesis on two grounds. First of all, the famous Throne verse (Qur'an 2: 255) is absent from the inscriptional programme. Secondly, Begley has the somewhat sexist conviction that the Taj Mahal could not just be a tomb for Mumtaz (a woman) but her cenotaph is exactly in the very centre of the symmetrical design. Koch (2012: 170) notes: "The larger cenotaph of Shah Jahan was added on its western side, and thus from a formal point of view appears as an afterthought. This placing gave substance to the rumour of the emperor's burial having been planned not within the Taj Mahal but on the opposite side of the Yamuna in a black marble tomb." Elsewhere, Koch (2012: 144–147) does mention Lahauri's reference to the white marble platform on which the mausoleum stands as *kursi*, meaning both 'terrace' and 'throne'. But she agrees with most scholars that the mausoleum was intended as an earthly replica of the mansion of Mumtaz in the garden of paradise.

Koch (2012: 85–88, 224, 229) also draws attention to the religiously contested nature of tomb building. Large tombs contradicted both orthodox Islamic and Hindu regulations for how to deal with the dead. For Hindus, dead bodies and cemeteries are impure. For orthodox Muslims, tomb visits easily turn into tomb worship. Shah Jahan's orthodox successor Aurangzeb would reject the visiting of tombs and the roofing of buildings containing tombs. (2012: 88)

1.4 *The Turco-Mongol Timurid (and Ilkhan) Garden Tradition*

The third source of influence on the Taj garden is the Timurid garden tradition. The Turkish speaking Muslim Timur of Samarqand and his Timurid dynasty (1369–1506) would culturally influence their Timurid descendant Babur who founded the Mughal dynasty of India (1526–1858). According to James L. Wescoat, Jr., it was very much a Timurid concept throughout Central Asia "to build gardens at sites outside of and distinct from walled towns, but also distinct from ordinary cultivated lands or pastoral meadows. (..) Suburban gardens were the locus from which walled cities and towns were conquered and ruled." (Wescoat paraphrased by Richards 1996: 261)

This feature was related to another feature of the Timurid garden tradition. Due to the nomadic background of the Turco-Mongols and because of their constant military campaigns, suburban gardens were used for encampment, imperial armies camping in tents and pavilions on carpets, scattered throughout royal garden grounds—instead of watching symmetrical gardens from permanent structures. (Moynihan 1982: 50; Thomas W. Lentz 1996: 31–57) Creating gardens meant establishing sovereignty and leaving their imperial and dynastic mark on the landscape.[1] When Timur (1336–1404) was on campaign abroad, all citizens of Samarkand, rich and poor, had access to his gardens. (Moynihan 1982: 72) The Timurid royal gardens were simultaneously public and private pleasure gardens and exclusive centres of political power and dynastic legitimacy. Their Turco-Mongol successors in Tabriz, the Ilkhans, adopted the Persian garden tradition but with that same nomadic and military twist, changing the use of the garden from inactive to active, from observing the garden to walking in it, from small palace garden size to large encampment size, from narrow channels to rushing waterfalls, from geometrically shaped plots and rows of trees to plots planted with fruit trees. (Pinder-Wilson 1976: 77; Moynihan

1 Thomas W. Lentz (1996: 31) writes: "From the very beginning of the Timurid state, the garden can be viewed as central to the dynasty's own carefully contrived vision of its power, legitimacy, and mythology. The circumstances of their rise to power in Central Asia and Iran created the need for a strategy that simultaneously exploited the often opposed traditions of urban Islam and the Turco-Mongol world of the steppe."

1982: 49) The Mughal rulers, themselves new to India and in need of legitimacy, would associate with the Timurid legacy and its memory of territorial conquest and control, and continue much of the Timurid garden tradition and its imperial and dynastic functions. (Welch 1996: 77; Wescoat 1996: 140, 144)[2]

1.5 *The Delhi and Mughal Garden Traditions*

Finally, the Taj garden was influenced by the Delhi and Mughal garden traditions. The Mughals (1526–1858) were not the first Muslim rulers to establish an empire in India. After Muhammad of Ghor's initial conquests (1192–1200), five successive Sultanates (1206–1526) had ruled over parts of India. (Keay 2001: 231–288) In India, apart from rivers, there are no free-flowing waters, just the water of wells and of storage tanks collecting rainwater. The Delhi Sultans had inherited the Indian hydraulic engineering of stepwells, reservoirs and gardens with artificial ponds and water channels. Buildings and gardens had been constructed around stored water. The first Mughal, Babur, noticed this feature immediately on arrival in Delhi but he did not like it because he missed the streams of his mountainous homeland. (Welch 1996: 61–67)

Another feature of Delhi Sultanate gardens was the lack of a rigid formal structure. Anthony Welch (1996: 74) writes: "Thus water storage facilities not only supplied the orchards and vegetable gardens that profited Sultan Firuz, they were also the water holes that attracted game, and Firuz Shah was as fascinated by hunting as he was by architecture and engineering." These informal gardens, thus, were hunting parks as well.

The Mughals, however, did not like the informal character of these gardens. They were, instead, very keen on formal gardens displaying symmetry. Irfan Habib (1996: 127) writes: "Abu'l Fazl noted (ca. 1595) that "in the past" the flowers in the Indian flower gardens (*bustan-ha*) were sown without any arrangement, and it was with Babur that avenues along flowerbeds (*khiyaban-bandi*) and well-planned layouts (*tarh-arai*) were introduced." Nature meant 'ordered nature'. Order had to be imposed on the landscape. The formal imperial garden imposed order over the disorderly, physically dusty, and multilayered social

2 Lentz (1996: 56–57) suggests: "For Babur, fully cognizant of dynastic traditions that saw garden building as a princely prerogative, the garden in real and symbolic terms established a Timurid presence, an expression of territorial conquest and control in new lands. It simultaneously served as a bridge back to the dynasty's powerful legacy in the Turco-Iranian world. (..) Babur's conception of the garden was highly charged; it was perceived as an embodiment of Timurid rule, traditions, and memory. (..) Babur understood it as a vital source of power and identity in a new world." From Akbar onwards, gardens were significant for their symbolic connotations, much less for active territorial construction directed from garden encampments. (Wescoat 1997: 187, 190–192).

landscape of India. This need did not just apply to their public gardens in Delhi and Kabul but also to their private gardens in Kashmir that were terraced on sloping ground, in the Shalamar Bagh case with canals through the linear axis down to the lake, imitating a cascading mountain stream in an orderly fashion while opening up a landscape view. (Fairchild Ruggles 2008: 122–123; Richards 1996: 261–263) Babur loved nature as a source of pleasure to be exploited.[3]

Another feature of Delhi Sultanate gardens to be mentioned here was their function of enabling the practice of burying the dead in pleasure gardens and of transforming garden pavilions into garden tombs, eventually leading to the relatively late (sixteenth century) phenomenon of tomb gardens dedicated specifically to dynastic commemoration, religious prayer, and the acquisition of merit and blessing. (Fairchild Ruggles 2008: 106–110) The Mughal practice of placing family tombs in gardens had not been a Timurid practice but came instead from the Delhi Sultans. (Welch 1996: 83, 87; contra Jellicoe 1976: 112)

Whereas the Delhi Sultans used buildings to make their ambitions known, the Mughals used gardens to get their message across. (Welch 1996: 92) Formal palace gardens were public places for audiences. But after Akbar's innovation (in 1571) to enclose the tomb of his father Humayun in a quadripartite garden (*chahar bagh*), Mughal tomb gardens also came to function as public spaces.[4] In the Taj Mahal tomb garden, the poor were admitted to the galleries three times a week during the rainy season to receive alms on behalf of the emperor. (Habib 1996: 136; Blake 1996: 171)

Koch ([2006] 2012: 170, 249) is not convinced that the 'old tale' of an additional mausoleum opposite the river is plausible: "It goes back to Jean-Baptiste Tavernier who, when at Agra in 1665, reported that 'Shahjahan began to build his own tomb on the other side of the river, but the war with his sons interrupted his plan, and Aurangzeb, who reigns at present, is not disposed to complete it.' Though there is no other historical evidence to support this claim, it became the most enduring of the legends of the Taj, and even led to excava-

3 Moynihan (1996: 103–104) states: "In the *Babur-Nama*, we note that when Babur sighted a particularly attractive feature in the landscape—a spring, a stream, a great view, a rock to be shaped—he ordered a garden made to take advantage of it. (..) On many occasions he ordered the "straightening of a stream", as his impulse was to impose order on nature. His rill-like watercourses were straight, and he loved cascades; he preferred falling waters to fountains."

4 Richards (1996: 263–264) states: "Royal tomb-gardens were the focus for an emerging royal cult in which the living ruler and his court prayed for his deceased predecessors. Humayun's tomb, completed in 1571 by his son, Akbar, was the first such shrine. Humayun's resting place became the immediate destination of his descendants when they returned to or arrived in Delhi. On each occasion they offered prayers and made a ritual circumambulation of the tomb."

tions in the Mahtab Bagh in the early 1990s. These showed no foundations of a mausoleum." Fairchild Ruggles (2008: 127–128) agrees but suggests that visually, the garden should be taken together with the Moonlight Garden (Mahtab Bagh) on the Taj's opposite riverbank. If taken together, the unexpected positioning of the tomb on the river edge at the very end of the Taj garden, instead of at its four-part cross-axial centre, would suddenly make sense because it is, in fact, halfway the Moonlight Garden, that is to say, at the centre after all. While walking around the tomb, visitors enjoy the linear north-south axis and long-range views of both the Taj garden and the natural landscape along and across the river. Fairchild Ruggles (2008: 122–129) argues convincingly that the Taj Mahal was a commemorative garden but also a pleasure garden within the wider landscape of the Yamuna River and its east-west axis. She also suggests that the inside-outside interaction between the enclosed garden and the open landscape has a parallel in the interaction between the floral motifs on the walls of the Taj architecture and the flowers in nature and in pleasure gardens, again blurring the distinction between architecture and nature. (2008: 121) Elsewhere, she explains why walls and carpets could have the same function: both presume a typically Islamic aesthetics that focuses on surfaces instead of volumes.[5]

The exact original planting is the least known aspect of the Taj garden. (Koch 2012: 138–140) The Mughal gardens in general made a strong appeal to all the senses, according to Richards: "it was delightful in the warm Indian climate to be outdoors under shade, with moisture and the sound of water running, the many colors of the flowers, and the taste of fresh fruits. Specially designed, open-air gardens fitted with carpets and cushions created a voluptuous setting for aristocratic repose." (Richards 1996: 262) Regarding the royal and noble tomb-gardens, their paradise imagery was explicitly religious in design and intent, and Shah Jahan's annual commemoration of the death of his wife consisted of pious ceremonies attended by nobles and ordinary citizens alike. (1996: 264–265; Koch 2012: 229) Koch (2012: 222–224) adds that the flowers and plants had not only explicitly paradisiacal connotations but also political sig-

5 Fairchild Ruggles (2008: 73–74) writes: "a geometric aesthetic that asks viewers to read visual forms as a series of interconnected flat surfaces, rather than volumetric spaces. (..) throughout the Islamic world, landscape architects often planted shrubs and plants at such a depth below the pavement level that their blooms and foliage could be seen from above as horizontal surfaces. (..) gardens were perceived not as volumetric structures but as surfaces that one looked across and beyond to more distant views. (..) the flower heads were best seen from above (..) as dashes of color in a green carpet." Surfaces and figures in Islamic painting, I may add, are two-dimensional instead of three-dimensional: they don't cast shadows, that is to say, they avoid the polytheistic risk of becoming full-fledged figures that can be idolized.

nificance, demonstrated by the cenotaphs of Shah Jahan on which flowers were given preference over inscriptions. Flower vases were 'vases of plenty' symbolizing prosperity. (2012: 104, 219) Poets eulogized Shah Jahan as 'the spring of the flower garden of justice and generosity' under whose imperial rule 'Hindustan has become the rose garden of the earth'. (2012: 224) Geometrical patterning had been characteristic of early Mughal architectural decoration but in the Taj Mahal, it was demoted and used for floors and stone screens, floral designs becoming the nobler form of ornament and applied in a hierarchical progression from being absent at the gate and rare in the garden buildings to abundant in the mausoleum. (2012: 137, 217)

Part 2 The Ryoan-Ji Zen Dry Landscape Garden

2.1 *Introduction to the 'Dry Landscape Garden'* (*kare-sansui*) *of Ryoan-ji*

One of today's most well-known Japanese gardens, the 'dry landscape garden' (*kare-sansui*) of Ryoan-ji, the 'Peace Dragon Temple' in Kyoto, was a neglected rock garden for several centuries that only acquired a reputation for being an expression of Zen Buddhism after World War II, as Shoji Yamada (2009: 110–168) suggests convincingly. The earliest descriptions of a garden in front of the main hall date from the early 1680s. They mention a composition of nine (instead of fifteen) rocks representing the ancient Chinese story 'Tiger Cubs Crossing the River'. (Kuitert 2002: 102) The present-day rock-and-sand garden consists of an arrangement of fifteen rocks in five groups of various sizes in a sea of grey-white gravel that is raked daily into set patterns. On one side, the garden is viewed from the veranda of a Rinzai temple building, on the other three sides it is enclosed by a tile-topped earthen wall. It was designed during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), probably around 1500 after the destruction and rebuilding of the buildings, as a landscape garden. Rinzai monks would have raked the sand and contemplated the view, both as part of their meditative practices. The temple grounds were initially known for the beauty of (a) weeping cherry tree(s), not apparently for the beauty of the rocks. (Berthier 2000: 35) The function of the rock garden may have changed over time because in a 1799 woodcut sketch of the garden by Akisato in *Illustrated Guide to Noted Gardens of Kyoto*, visitors walk through the garden. (Yamada 2009: 109) The novelty of this type of "dry landscape" garden for Japanese contemporaries in the Muromachi period was that for the garden as a whole, not just for one "abbreviated" section within it, the use of real water had been abandoned completely. (Inaji 1998: 27) Nevertheless, the first visitors in 1488 will have immediately understood that this architectural space belonged to the genre 'landscape garden',

even if they were not able to reproduce the long history of Japanese garden architecture. (Slawson 1987: 40–55). The names and personal life stories of the garden architects of the dry landscape garden of Ryoan-ji are unknown. However, the cultural-historical and religious contexts are well-known, so it is still possible to at least reconstruct a number of 'guiding frames of reference' that left their mark on its garden architecture and perception.

2.2 *The Shinto Tradition*

Some aspects of this garden of Ryoan-ji stand, first of all (but not foremost), in the Shinto tradition of worshipping nature. (Inaji 1998: 3) Günter Nitschke (2007: 15) writes that "man-made recreations of *shinto*, divine islands, and *shinchi*, divine ponds, are found even in the earliest prehistoric shrines." Basically, they recall Japan's creation myth and reflect Japan's geography of mountainous islands scattered in the ocean.

Nitschke distinguishes three 'early archetypes' that he identifies as Shinto[6] ingredients of the later Japanese garden. The 'territorial archetype' uses knotting and binding to signal a claim to the possession of land and other property. The word *shime* means 'bound artefact', and the related word *shima* means 'land taken possession of', later acquiring the meaning of 'garden', or rather, 'a section of nature fenced off from the wilderness', and finally 'island floating in the ocean'. Ropes delimit a sacred area or object within a Shinto shrine. (Nitschke 2007: 18) The 'agricultural archetype' refers to the 'divine fields' (*shinden*) at the Ise shrine where rice is cultivated for the Sun goddess of fertility, a kind of sacred garden between the mountain of the deity from which water flows to the paddy fields, and the village community celebrating the yearly arrival of the deity on the opposite shore of the Isuzu river. According to Nitschke, "Pebble beaches or pebbled areas in Japanese gardens are more than mere copies of a natural phenomenon. They are archetypes of the hallowed ground of Shinto theophany." (Nitschke 2007: 19–20) The 'rock archetype' combines the appreciation of the beauty of rocks with the idea that unusual rocks could be the awesome abode of a divine spirit (*kami*) and therefore sacred.[7]

6 Breen and Teeuwen (2010: 45): "The concept of Shinto as 'Japan's indigenous religion' emerged much later than these networks [of classical and medieval shrines, LM]. Neither the classical *jingi* cult nor the Buddhist *jinguji* cult of shrine temples revolved around a discourse about Japan."

7 Allen S. Weiss (2013: 91) writes: "In Chinese and Japanese cosmology—be it Taoist, Buddhist, Shinto or animist—stones are not mere inanimate objects, but rather concentrations of cosmic and telluric energy (*chi*) flowing in different patterns throughout the universe. Zen master Dogen insists that pebbles are sentient beings that participate in Buddha's nature, and according to Shinto tradition, the natural or artificial rock arrangements of certain sites have

(Inaji 1998: 3) François Berthier notes: "Even when moved into a garden, the rock must not be touched by human hands: it must stay intact, remaining in its pure state, (..) to work it is to desacralize it."

The placement of stones will be the basis of garden design from the Heian period (794–1185) onwards and whilst drawing from the Shinto tradition, will take it far beyond it. The Heian term "stone setting" (*ishidate*) is synonymous with "garden making". (Inaji 1998: 19–22) Rocks and water are considered much more important in imitating nature, than plants or trees. One reason, I would suggest, is that Japanese gardens primarily reflect a cultural focus on imitating those parts of nature in Japan that have not been touched by agriculture. Like water, nature is associated with purity and spontaneity. But nature also seems to represent an accommodating force, a fertile source, more of cooperative harmony than of hostile violence, and thus favourable to agriculture. Like the Chinese, the Japanese "could happily regard the alteration of their environment as an adornment rather than subjugation of nature." (Keswick 1978: 30) The influential Chinese ideal image of a pleasure garden too, would be not to show how nature is transformed into culture or subjected to human control but to represent nature as an accommodating order that welcomes cultural adaptations as forms of human presence attuned to nature. Maggie Keswick (1978: 31) writes: "the walls around a Chinese garden would thus act, eventually, to block out the surrounding patterns of human activity so the inside could be turned back again to nature."

In the Shinto tradition, (re)connecting to nature is a sacred affair marked by sacred gates and purifying rituals. Nature is considered awesome, beyond human control, to be worshipped, a realm of cooperative harmony but also of erupting volcanoes, earthquakes and tornadoes, nonetheless a realm to which human beings belong. It is associated with awe and purity but also with belonging and being at home. (Kasulis 2004: 1–70)

2.3 *The Early Heian Tradition*

Secondly, there is the impact of the early Heian tradition (794–1185) that constituted a first wave of Chinese influence on Japanese culture. It introduced large-scale landscape gardens imitating the external forms, inner energy, and

the function of attracting the *kami*, those supernatural creatures that inhabit the surrounding forests and mountains. Indeed, the very first 'garden' might be deemed the fields of gravel or sacred rocks (*iwakura*) related to the *kami*, cordoned off by *shimenawa*, ropes used to delimit and protect sacred rocks and trees." Kuitert ([1988: 108] 2002: 93–94) points out that rock arrangements such as the Buddhist Triad rock arrangement drew from this animistic tradition but that waterfall arrangements hardly did.

seasonal workings of nature. The impact regards ornamental pond-and-island gardens for courtly pleasures such as seasonal boat trips on the garden lake, and later, during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), paradise gardens within temples of Pure Land Buddhism, both against the mental background of the melancholy feeling of *mujokan*, a gloomy sense of the impermanent and dreamlike nature of one's futile and floating existence. (Nitschke 2007: 29–32, 46–56) The Chinese (*shanshui*) and Japanese (*sansui*) word for 'landscape' literally means 'mountains-water', the two fundamental ingredients of Sino-Japanese landscape conceptions, with Daoist connotations of *yang* (active, bony; mountains) and *yin* (receptive, wet; water), or Confucian connotations of permanence (passive; mountain) and change (active; water). (Wicks 2004: 117; Vanderstappen 2014: 13–14; Keswick 1978: 155–158, 165) Water in lakes and ponds was used to balance mountains and to reflect buildings.[8] In both traditions, nature is associated with cultural values such as beauty and harmony, albeit natural harmony in the Daoist case and social harmony in the Confucian case. Harmony with nature was not self-evident, however. Wybe Kuitert (2002: 40–49) points out that the *Sakuteiki*, the esoteric handbook for garden architecture from around 1075, pays a lot of attention to the geomantics of a site, that is to say, to the potential danger of the natural environment if ignored. The actual garden was meant to recall the lyrical aspects of nature that the visitors knew from poetry, such as birds and flowers. Also, Kuitert (2002: 50–52, 98, 127) argues, the *Sakuteiki*'s plea for naturalness ("landscape scenery as it is found in nature") was not an urge to refrain from man-made artificialness, because the Heian period did not (yet) feel an opposition between rustic nature and urban culture, as did the Song Chinese literati.

Toshiro Inaji (1998: 13, 17, 32) explains how the inherited Chinese Tang garden prototype was realized on a reduced scale in Heian Japan, and how this

8 Fountains were avoided because fountains force water not to follow its natural flow. (Keswick 1978: 165–168) In China, mountains had entered the garden as miniature objects representing the dwellings of the Daoist Immortals, initially under Han emperor Wu-Di (141–186 BCE) as part of the imperial hunting parks that came to represent a microcosm of all the riches of the empire or universe. In Japan, these dwellings led to the symbolic rocky isles of garden lakes. The allusion to the earthly paradise of the Immortals does not turn the garden as a whole into an earthly paradise but aims at creating scenic effects within the garden. (Slawson 1987: 127–134) In China, single rocks had entered the garden during the Tang dynasty. (Keswick 1978: 75, 155–173) Grotesquely shaped but natural, hollowed by weather and time, pitted with holes, these standing stones were placed like sculptures. They evoke the presumed wildness of nature and symbolize the ill-definable Dao in a concentrated form. Keswick (1978: 158) notes: "the real wilderness was not entirely appealing. In miniature its qualities were easier to appreciate."

Heian type, in turn, became the garden prototype of the later Muromachi gardens. The Heian prototype as described in the *Sakuteiki*, evokes the spirit of nature by focusing on six basic elements of garden composition: artificial hills, pond, islands, white sand south garden, garden stream, and waterfall. Each of these basic elements can assume a number of stylized forms extracted from nature (*yo*). There are various styles for landscape gardens, for example, the "ocean style", the "river style", the "pond style", etc. If the prototype of the pond is the sea, its stylized form may combine a "deep-rooted rock" and a "wave-repelling stone". (Inaji 1998: 22–24) The Heian south garden was designed for ceremonial use. During the power shift from the Heian aristocratic class to the warrior class, however, this ceremonial function would be lost and the Muromachi south garden would become purely ornamental, to be viewed as outdoor scenery. Medieval small scenic gardens, including dry landscape gardens, would appear from the fourteenth century onwards. (Kuitert 2002: 60–61) According to Inaji (1998: 40–41) too, this loss of the ceremonial function explains the shift in style from Heian's "naturalist" style to Muromachi's "abstract" style. Yet, the Heian prototype would remain the same. The striking paradox regarding the "abstract" style of the south gardens of Muromachi Zen temples such as Ryoan-ji's rock garden, is that its field of coarse white sand, one of the six basic elements of Heian garden composition, now represents the omitted other basic element: the pond, shaped in the "ocean style" or "river style", with "wave-repelling" islands in it. Their counterpart, the Muromachi warrior class residential gardens, on the other hand, omit the white sand field in favour of the pond. The two Muromachi garden types thus offer two antithetical interpretations of the same Heian prototype. (Inaji 1998: 49)

2.4 *The Chinese Landscape Painting Tradition*

The dry landscape garden of Ryoan-ji stands, thirdly, in the Chinese tradition of landscape painting. This landscape painting tradition constitutes a second wave of Chinese influence on Japanese culture during the Kamakura era (1185–1336). (Nitschke 2007: 66) The landscape paintings of the Song dynasty (960–1276) and the Yüan dynasty (1276–1368) were very popular with members of the Japanese elite, especially the Zen monks and *samurai*.

Landscape painting had deep roots in the Chinese history of gardening. In South China, in the fourth century CE., urban scholarly bureaucrats who had estates in the countryside and Daoist feelings for nature and longevity within reach, "searched the mountains for the herbs of Immortality. Through these activities they began to look on the whole of nature as an *objet trouvé* and to build little pavilions from which to regard it. From this was born the notion of the 'borrowed landscape', in which the act of choosing a site, and building on

it a little viewing place, turned the whole landscape into a 'garden'. The first pavilion of this kind to become famous was the Orchid Pavilion, where one of the finest scrolls of calligraphy was composed in AD 353." (Keswick 1978: 79) Kuitert (2002: 77) stresses that both landscape scenery and gardens could now be appreciated for their own sake.

The basic retreats of the *literati* and the luxurious parks of the powerful constituted different strands that were combined much later in the city gardens of Loyang during the Song dynasty. (Keswick 1978: 53, 88–90) These private city gardens seem to have been open to any visitor. The layout of a classical Chinese garden was irregular and confusing, as opposed to the rectangular plan and arrangement as a regular progression of courtyards of the household complex. These city gardens full of walls and pavilions—in Chinese, gardens are 'built' instead of 'planted'—were nonetheless still supposed to blend into nature instead of dominating nature, Keswick (1978: 116–125) explains. Despite the numerous buildings, the garden landscape as a whole should look natural, as if come about spontaneously, without human interference—quite the opposite of Versailles' treatment of nature as if it were architecture (planting trees in avenues and clipping hedges into walls and even mazes). Chinese garden walls should ideally follow the contours of the site, and in the background appear or disappear with changing patterns of light, shadow and mist, thus marking or undoing the delimiting function of enclosures. (Keswick 1978: 134–135) It is not clear from its turbulent history (of fires) whether this also applied to the garden walls of Ryoan-ji. Weiss (2013: 28–31) suggests rather poetically that these walls emblematize the "ever-changing effects of the weather over centuries" and "constitute the irregular background against which appear the well-ordered forms of the garden." Maybe, beyond the walls would have been the 'borrowed landscape' that is now blocked from view due to the dense growth of nearby trees. (Kuitert 2002: 105 on Hosokawa Katsumoto; Nitschke 2007: 90) In Song China, nature was associated with cultural values such as irregularity, spontaneity, accessibility, and safe escape from the rigidity of cultural demands.

One characteristic of Chinese landscape paintings is the suggestion of depth in space. (Nitschke 2007: 76–77) Chinese landscape paintings are not just there to be contemplated visually from a distance but to be drawn into mentally. The viewer enters the landscape visually but then 'travels' it, 'swims' in it harmoniously. This is called 'mind-travelling' (*woyou*). (Law 2011) The landscape is a series of space-cells. Each space is separated from and linked to the next by water and mist. The scroll painting that one unwinds from right to left takes time to unfold. Thus, the space-cells are experienced over time, like walking through the landscape. (Keswick 1978: 94) When applied to gardens, suggest-

ing depth in space means that the natural forms of the garden should be seen as contained by the rectangular forms of the fences, doorposts and veranda, so that it is within this frame that a garden is created to look at. This combination of straight rectangular and natural forms is, according to Nitschke (2007: 10–12), a timeless feature of the Japanese sense of forms, with the dry landscape garden of Ryoan-ji as one of its most beautiful examples. Inspired by landscape paintings, certain places, such as the middle of the veranda, become static positions from which the visitor observes and follows the garden, as if the landscape painting is being unfurled before his eyes. David A. Slawson (1987: 80–83) calls it a 'scroll garden', to be distinguished from a 'stroll garden'.

Perception is particularly an issue in the case of this garden, since the garden is a little wider than the typical perceptual range, thus compelling the viewers standing at certain angles to try to broaden or enhance their capacity for taking in the scope of the dry landscape, as Steven Heine points out. (Heine, personal communication) The actual shallowness of the garden receives depth from a balanced composition of dynamic triangles (three stones or rock structures) in a vertically ascending slope, but also in a horizontally expanding surface. In the horizontally (invisible within the field of vision) vast expanse, the dynamic between movement and rest (stones and rock structures that stand in certain directions in relation to one another) provides rhythm and tension. Triangles have a stable base but can also express movement by leaning forwards, backwards or sideways. The ratios of 3:1 and 3:2 for pairs of rocks closely resemble the Greek Golden Mean. The rock garden of Ryoan-ji also provides striking examples of such triangular relations, rhythm and classical proportions. (Slawson 1987: 85–101) Nitschke (2007: 106) notes: "The Heian garden imitates the outer forms of nature within a selective landscape of natural features. It seems to me that the Muromachi garden takes a step further: it seeks to imitate the inner forms of nature and thereby fathom the secret laws of its proportions and rhythms, energy and movement. Its means are abstract compositions of naturally-occurring materials. Nor is there anything 'unnatural' about such compositions; after all, their rocks came directly from nature."

Regarding the Japanese evocation of the same (objective) setting and (subjective) atmosphere as in nature itself, Slawson (1987: 70–72) signals an important shift in emphasis, between the *Sakuteiki* from around 1075, and the *Illustrations for the design of mountain, water and hill landscapes* from 1466. While in the 13th century, the emphasis is on recreating the selected natural scenery and landscapes, the 15th century places additional emphasis on the effects of selected materials. By paying more attention to the perceptual qualities of size, form, texture and configuration of materials, the garden does not become more strongly anchored in the natural world itself but in the human senses that

perceive this natural world. It is not the natural scenery that is of foremost importance now, it is the mood that it evokes which is of greatest relevance. Originally, it must have been the case that a certain mood was characteristic of a certain type of landscape in which that mood was evoked, just as in Shinto the gods and spirits live in certain rocks, trees and streams. In the *Illustrations* one witnesses a shift away from feature-oriented landscapes and moods assigned to the natural world, to quality-oriented landscapes and moods assigned to the senses and one's own heart. In both phases, though, the natural and the emotional worlds enter into a symbiosis.

The monochrome soberness of the materials reinforces the impression that the sandy rock garden of Ryoan-ji suggests a highly abstract landscape that, according to garden architects from the Edo period (1603–1868), depicts a lake or a sea with islands in it, alluding to the Daoist Isles of the Immortals (Berthier 2000: 39), while others explain the five rock formations as the 'Five Mountains' (a five-fold classification principle for Zen monasteries). (Vos, Zürcher 1964: 151) Esoteric Buddhism would have contributed the Indic cosmological connotation of Mount Meru. There is also the parallel popularity of the art of 'tray landscape' (*bonsan*), representing landscapes on a miniature scale. One paradox of the garden is that its landscape combination of 'mountains' and 'water' is brought about by a combination of 'rocks' and 'pebbles'. (Weiss 2013: 103) If it depicts an ocean with islands, then the concentric ripple wave pattern around the islands suggests that these islands have cosmogonically risen from the bottom of the ocean. (Weiss 2013: 108–109; cf. Nitschke 2007: 22) It is tempting to compare the impression of a high degree of abstraction to the abstract landscape paintings *Pier en Oceaan* (1914) and *Compositie nr. 10* (1915) by Piet Mondriaan, and to present the rock garden of Ryoan-ji as a breakthrough into abstract art. Can one, however, speak of 'abstract art' in this case? Reduction in scale, miniaturization in favor of a highly compact version of a natural landscape, still offers a small-scale view of (almost) the entire landscape and makes use of natural forms and landscape materials such as sand and rocks. (cf. however Inaji 1998: 49 and Nakagawara 2004: 93) Yet, the 'sea of pebbles' marks a shift from mimesis to symbolism, from image to metaphor, as Camelia Nakagawara (2004: 96) argues whilst pointing out that the Chinese notion of *sansui* ('landscape') itself, consisting of the characters for 'mountains' and 'water', is already "a metaphorical reduction of landscape into symbolic elements: mountains equal heaven and water equals earth." She (2004: 86) suggests an additional layer of meaning by including the presumed presence of a reference to the dynamic Chinese *yin-yang* opposition between mountains (masculine, stable, permanent, powerful, assertive) and water (feminine, unstable, formless, nullifying) that is turned upside down: "the use of stone material to express

water is an almost perverse rendering of the *yin* and *yang* principles, since it expresses water, a *yin* element, by a *yang* material, stone. Thus, one can consider a stone garden to be an obliteration of the *yin* principle from the form, but one which still maintains it in content by substitution with the *yang* material. Such a choice could be construed as symptomatic of the "masculine" age of Muromachi." (2004: 96)

2.5 *The Muromachi Cultural Tradition*

Before being seen in a Zen light, the dry landscape garden of Ryoan-ji, has to be understood in terms of the Muromachi culture that created this garden, according to Ichiro Ishida (1963: 417–432). In order to characterize Muromachi culture, Ishida compares three periods in Japanese Buddhism.

In the Nara and Heian periods (710–1185), he explains, a static Buddhist worldview displays a homogeneous universe of man and Buddha united in a hierarchical organization of the cosmos (cf. mandalas) where Buddhahood is manifested in both man and nature, where individual persons do not exist outside the universal Buddha(s), and where through discipline man's innate Buddhahood will be realized fully after death, thus rising to a state of enjoying the permanent, where time is absorbed and dissolved in space, and where man is absorbed and dissolved in the Buddha.

In the Kamakura period (1185–1333), a dualist Buddhist worldview sees a sharp separation between man's impure world and muddy mind and Amida Buddha's Pure Land and enlightened mind, a heterogeneous universe with men and Buddhas living in different worlds. Exclusive selection (of one Buddha and one method of salvation) and explicit rejection of alternative choices are considered an absolute necessity. Increasingly, access to the Pure Land becomes less dependent on man's efforts to rise to the challenge and more dependent on Amida's saving grace to come down to man and permeate the mind-heart of every individual, thus reinforcing in him the purposeful wish for a strong and consistent mind-set in an impermanent world whose unity and hierarchical organization are undermined, where space gradually becomes incorporated into the impermanence of time, and where the Buddha becomes incorporated in man.

In the Muromachi period (1336–1573), a fluid Buddhist worldview shifts its focus decisively to the inner world of the individual where the Buddha is now located. Having entered the individual's mind-heart, there is no longer a universal Buddha outside the heart-mind of the individual. All things outside the enlightened individual are regarded as manifestations of his own Buddha heart-mind. No exclusive selection and no explicit rejection of alternative choices are needed. Muromachi art too, delights in combining different styles,

periods, and subjective comments. (Ishida 1963: 423) Instead of enjoying the permanent (Nara-Heian) or lamenting the impermanent (Kamakura), Muromachi culture enjoys the indefinite, embraces the all-inclusive diversity and flow of constant change, in which space is completely absorbed by time, and the Buddha by man. Muromachi culture develops an aesthetics of infinite subjective associations and changing moods arising from the continual shifting of the relationship between the viewer and the object viewed, corresponding to the viewer's own continual physical movement in the stroll garden and along the verandas of the scroll garden, thus enabling a cumulative appreciation of its various perceived aspects.

Ishida (1963: 429) states that this principle is best represented in the Ryoan-ji garden where the stones are so arranged that two or three stones are always out of view. Thus, the garden takes on different aspects according to the changing position of the viewer. And the different aspects trigger a variety of subjective associations that may lead to a subjective experience of unity. This subjective experience of unity, Ishida (1963: 430) suggests, is not due to Zen having created Muromachi culture but it is in tune with the Zen tradition that nurtured and sustained it. Instead of Muromachi culture being in tune with Zen, I would rather suggest Zen to be in tune with Muromachi culture. Why?

2.6 *The Zen Buddhist Tradition*

According to Kuitert (2002: 70–72), Japan's cultural and political innovation during the latter part of the Kamakura period (1185–1333) went by the name of Zen whose Chinese cultural contents became increasingly interesting to the shoguns and warriors who had to compete with Kyoto's imperial courtly culture. The military seized political power and simultaneously became the patrons of Zen culture. Their interest in landscape painting and garden architecture would primarily have been a status enhancing interest in Chinese culture and art, much less a spiritual interest in Buddhism. Chinese professionals in (landscape painting and) garden architecture who had fled the Yüan takeover of Song China would have designed the new Chinese styled gardens of warrior residences and Zen monasteries alike, not as Zen gardens but as gardens of recreation and contemplation. (Inaji 1998: 40; Kuitert 2002: 129–138) Zen had no difficulty appropriating this style as its own. The dry landscape garden of Ryoan-ji stands, therefore, also in the Chinese-Japanese tradition of Zen Buddhism.

The small-scale garden is part of a Zen monastery of the Rinzai sect and was designed as an integral part of the monastery, during a period in which Zen masters applied themselves to both landscape painting and garden architecture. Zen paintings are not abstract. Their painters do not attempt to unravel

or deny the natural forms: they reduce but do not abstract. (Vos, Zürcher 1964: 50–60, 146–147; cf. Kuitert 2002: 33). This is to a great extent due to Daoist influence on landscape painting and on Zen. Daoism sees the Dao or Great Void in nature thickening as mountains, the bare bones of a landscape with trees as its flesh, and melting as water in rivers or vaporising as moist in mists and clouds, the breath or energy flow (*qi*) of a landscape. Daoism thus reduces the natural landscape to its essence. (Sullivan 1979: 27) Zen reduction also has to do with the Zen Buddhist view of the relationship between the empirical world and 'emptiness' (*shunyata*, the transitory and groundless character of empirical reality). In their unconstrained spontaneity, the natural forms manifest the very emptiness that the depth dimension of the natural forms consists of. That is to say, the natural forms are seen as transitory, ephemeral, transient. The notion 'dry' (*kare*) means 'dried-up' but also 'withered'. (Nitschke 2007: 89; Wicks 2004: 113–114) This 'withering' is a Buddhist reference to nature's intrinsic state of impermanence. Nature is considered ultimately impermanent, and an illusion if one were to look for a hard core. But this presumed illusory reality is nonetheless appreciated positively, like the illusory aspect of the landscape arts among Kitayama Zen monks. (Parker 1999: 155–181) Omine Akira and Steve Odin point out that the spiritual-aesthetic concept and appreciation of nature as salvific companion and as Buddha, a salvation path known as *geido* or the '*dao* of art', is not limited to Zen in the history of Japanese Buddhism. (Odin 1991: 355–357)

Being empty, lacking a hard core, has its beauty in the eyes of the 'beholder' who does not hold on to his own conceptual constructs of nature but allows natural forms to wither and flourish alike. The presumed manifestation of emptiness is conceived as an inherent characteristic of neither the natural forms nor the empty space, but a realization that takes place intuitively in the human spirit. The function of the Zen garden lies in it being contemplated. Contemplation requires more than taking a certain position in order to view a landscape. According to Robert Wicks, meditation on the formal simplicity of rocks and gravel can turn into a focus on the awareness "that one's own mind had been moving throughout the experience—a movement that can, moreover, approach a pure sense of time-awareness. Indeed, one might consider further whether or not there had ever been anything absolutely permanent in one's experience. The static composition of the garden, in other words, can induce the pure experience of time's flow." (Wicks 2004, 120) Nitschke, similarly, argues that the key to finding the meaning of the garden of Ryoan-ji is a meditation technique where one focuses on one point. The stones in the garden are so perfectly arranged on the surface that, for the meditating visitor, the outlines slowly fade and the stones and sand are gradually perceived as one large

whole. In this way, the energy of the human being whose senses are focused outwards towards the things in the world outside, turns inwards, to consciousness at the center of his body. The visitor is redirected back towards himself as selfless. But, Nitschke adds, this "needs the sophisticated interplay of form with its non-form, of object with its space." (Nitschke 2007, 92). Nitschke omits to add that in Zen, this does not lead to disengagement (ab-straction) from the outer world but to disengagement from the distinction between the outside and inner world.

The rock garden of Ryoan-ji may appear relatively empty, but that is not to say that this is how 'emptiness' is visualized. That the natural forms are 'empty' is certainly suggested by the few rocks in empty space and the monochrome use of materials, but this suggestion is only accessible to a mind that is spiritually capable of allowing the full scope of this ultimate reality to take him by surprise and to take over from him entirely, both mentally and bodily. During my PhD studies in Kyoto on Zen philosophy, it struck me that instead of depicting 'emptiness,' the dry landscape garden reflects the state of consciousness of the visitor. If the visitor is a tourist, then he or she will see an ocean with islands in it, or a landscape with mountains. A tourist, after all, looks for signs that signify something. And if the visitor is more advanced, say a Zen novice, then he may see or even experience a representation of 'emptiness'. A Zen novice, after all, longs for signs that mean nothing significant, nothing substantial, sheer impermanence and nothingness. The novice may notice that the rocks are not mountains but *like* mountains, that the gravel is *like* an ocean, and that this quality of likeness is not just a quality of paintings but of the entire world, that is to say, another form of illusion or image without an original. (Nishitani 1982: 139–140, 157–159) If the visitor is a Zen master, however, the garden will empty his mind and eliminate all conceptions of gardens and emptiness occupying his mind, conceptions of natural forms and empty spaces and also of his self-image and spiritual progress. After all, the Zen master longs for nothing. His mind does not hold on to anything distinguishable and able to be grasped. Instead, his mind and body are taken over by nature, becoming a manifestation that is indistinguishable from the rock garden in which the Zen master finds himself, or rather loses himself. Both the garden and the Zen master and the conceptual distinction between the two (as if they were an object and a subject to be distinguished) sink into the groundless void of an empty reality that turns out to be no other than its spontaneous manifestation as empirical reality, thus reappearing as the true face of nature instead of disappearing or evaporating into abstraction. (Minnema 2002) Nature is associated with impermanence and fragility but also with pure beauty and spontaneous simplicity.

Part 3 Comparisons

3.1 *Garden Enclosure and Accessibility*

One of the most characteristic features of a garden is that it is an enclosed space. In general, a garden is an enclosed piece of nature, walled off from the environment, accessible through doors in the enclosure but only to those who are allowed in. Several myths and fairy tales speak of bewitched gardens and forbidden fruits. In those gardens, one is not necessarily encouraged to enter.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, one is explicitly encouraged to enter. Qur'an sura 89 'The Dawn' is written on its gateway. God invites the believer: "Enter thou my Paradise!" One's faith is the exclusive and ultimate precondition for entering. By entering, the faithful approach a tomb of death but recognize that death is not their final destiny. For those who have entered to commemorate the dead instead of celebrating life, the tomb garden turns out to be a pleasure garden. The blurring distinction between a tomb garden and a pleasure garden implies the blurring distinction between death and life. One is reminded of one's own death and afterlife.

In addition to this divine invitation, one is the emperor's guest. The poor were admitted occasionally to receive alms on behalf of the emperor. And imperial family members would have come to pray at the tomb. The Taj Mahal garden was a public garden where visitors paid their respect to the dead and living members of the dynasty. The powerless were allowed entrance by the powerful. By entering, the powerless recognized the legitimacy of their rulers, and entry as a privilege.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, the rooms of the Zen monastery whose doors open up to the veranda constitute a rectangular form that frames the view of the scroll garden. They are like a window, not like a gateway, and the veranda is like a gallery. The walls enclosing the garden function as the background for a screen projection. The visitors were invited to travel mentally through the landscape. This may have included the 'borrowing landscape' beyond the actual walls. The visitors would have been the Zen abbot's guests, fellow monks, urban *literati*, and the monks' *samurai* patrons.

3.2 *Blurring Boundaries between Inside and Outside*

How final are the walls of these gardens, the boundaries between inside and outside?

Regarding the Taj Mahal garden, Jonas Lehrman (1980: 48) writes about Islamic gardens: "Entry is normally on the central axis, and at the lowest level when the garden is terraced. Such location creates instant maximum effect and clearly determines the view of the space that the observer is expected to take."

Once inside, the north-south axis linking the Taj gateway to the tomb gives the visitor a clear sense of direction. It is only by the time that one arrives at the raised platform that one's horizon is suddenly broadened, far beyond the garden walls, in all directions including the Yamuna river and the garden on the opposite bank. Fairchild Ruggles (2008: 121) suggests that this inside-outside interaction between the enclosed garden and the open landscape has a parallel in the blurring boundaries between architecture and nature in the interaction between the inlaid flower motifs in the tomb stones and the flowers in the garden. One may also consider a calculated impact of dawn and moonlight on the garden layout in this connection.

Regarding the Ryoan-ji garden, once inside the garden, or rather, once the garden view within full sight, the features of nature are appreciated for their impact on the mood and mindset of the visitor. Within a Zen framework of reference, the features of nature are perceived to be outside of the mind of the visitor until the visitor realizes that he is watching the panorama or movie of his own mind. The inside of the garden turns out to be the outside of the visitor's mind until the distinction between outside and inside is blurred. This blurring of distinctions has a parallel in the blurring boundaries between architecture and nature in the interaction between the worn-out pottery-like texture of the garden walls that embody, Weiss (2013: 28–31) suggests, the ever-changing effects of the weather over centuries and represent the irregular features of nature, on the one hand, and the regular features of architecture that the rectangular shape of the walls enclosing the rectangular garden on three sides displays, on the other.

3.3 *Gardens as Representations of Nature*

Gardens are, first of all, meant to represent nature or aspects of nature. To the extent that this piece of nature is made accessible to humans and is thus conditional upon human views and needs, the natural environment is denaturalized. This piece of nature is cut out of nature as a whole and cordoned off from the surrounding nature, by ropes that delimit a sacred area in the case of a Shinto shrine, or by walls that fence off the dangers of nature, or by formalizing nature in geometric patterns in the case of Islamic gardens, or by reducing its presumed wilderness to miniature proportions in the case of single rocks with strange shapes placed like sculptures in Chinese gardens.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, this piece of nature seems meant to (pro)claim that it is part of nature because it shows its capacity to flourish, to respond to the nurturing force of water.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, this piece of nature seems meant to (pro)claim that it is part of nature because it shows its basic elements, moun-

tains and water, and the process of withering, of participating in the wearing force of seasonal change and decaying time.

3.4 *Gardens as Representations of Culture*

Gardens are also meant to represent culture, or aspects of culture, and to make this piece of culture accessible to humans. But again, this piece of culture is cut out of culture as a whole and cordoned off from the surrounding culture, by dedicating the territory to entertainment and repose but not to hunting in the case of the Persian *bagh*, or to encampment in the case of the Timurids, or to botany in the case of Persians and Mughals alike.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, this piece of culture seems meant to (pro)claim that it is part of culture by fulfilling several cultural functions. It fertilizes a poor soil in dry seasons, it displays hydraulic engineering, it enables the enjoyment of the beauty and fragrance of flowers, the shade of trees, and the coolness of water, it facilitates social entertainment, it displays imperial power, it legitimizes the Mughal dynasty. Last but not least, it contemplates death and the afterlife in Paradise.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, this piece of culture seems meant to (pro)claim that it is part of culture by displaying the cultivation of Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, by displaying the integration of references to the cultural and religious heritage of the past and present, and by facilitating social entertainment. Last but not least, it facilitates the contemplation of death and rebirth, the identity of life and death, the omnipresence of impermanence, the awesome cycle of nature.

3.5 *Gardens as Transformations of Nature and Culture*

Gardens, most of all, are meant to mediate between nature and culture, to bring about a transformation of nature into culture and of culture into nature. How exactly this transformation ideally comes about depends on the concepts of nature and culture that the gardens themselves are founded on.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, the transformation of nature into culture initially takes the form of hydraulic intervention. Water is exploited for purposes of irrigation, turning a piece of inhospitable nature into a piece of fertile agriculture. Water is used for growing plants and trees. In addition to this form of transformation, nature's contours are brought into conformity with the highly rational shapes of geometry. Architecture frames nature, not in the form of hedges that take the shape and function of walls, like in Versailles, but in the form of brick walls, marble fountains and straight canals that enclose nature, and enable nature to flourish and become part of culture. Formalization is imposed on nature in order to integrate the

irregularity of nature into the regular order of culture and into the rule of territorial power politics.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, the transformation of nature into culture initially takes the form of recycling nature. Water is already abundantly present and available for all kinds of purposes. Nature is awesome but also accommodating, and culture is welcome to make use of it, in this case to represent oceans. In the dry landscape garden, water itself is not even used but replaced with equally natural materials such as pebbles. Nature is not transformed into agriculture but recycled and reshaped into the basic building blocks of a natural landscape, 'mountains' and 'water', rocks and pebbles. In addition to this form of transformation, nature's contours are followed and stylized into the highly emotional shapes of Japanese aesthetics. Architecture frames nature into the screen view of a scroll garden in order to contemplate nature and be moved by its natural features. Initial watching, however, turns into 'mental travelling' through the landscape, that is to say, into allowing nature (as perceived) to overwhelm the cultural mindset of the mental traveler. Nature, then, frames culture. Culture is enabled to become part of nature (as perceived). Formalization is added in order to heighten the existential experience of the irregularity, spontaneity and flow of nature.

3.6 *Cultivating Nature, Dealing with Life*

Another way nature is transformed into culture is through the mobilization of the potential of nature to become a carrier, sign or symbol of cultural values and patterns of meaning.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, nature is integrated in a monumental form of architecture. Nature conquered, thus, becomes fruit-bearing proof of the monumental achievements of an imperial culture that demonstrates the power of its ruling dynasty. Moreover, the symmetry of the garden is meant to visualize the divine order embedded in nature. Nature becomes a sign of the Creator. Finally, especially in this case of a tomb garden, the earthly pleasure garden becomes a tangible symbol and foretaste of the heavenly pleasure garden of Paradise.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, nature is associated with cultural values such as harmony, purity, spontaneity, beauty, simplicity, fragility, and impermanence, not with notions like conflict, violence, danger, and chaos. Nature is not available for exploitation and conquest, subjugation and monumentalization. If anything, architecture is integrated into the monumental features of nature, the 'awe-inspiring nature' of the Shinto and Daoist traditions. Mountain paths, seasonal rhythms, and the flow of life are to be followed in humility, instead of conquered in pride.

3.7 *Idealizing Nature, Dealing with Death*

Both these gardens idealize nature and in doing so, bring culture to perfection. But they do so differently.

In the case of the Taj Mahal garden, the most beautiful flowers, the most distinguished fruit trees, and the most refreshing abundance of water are arranged and cultivated to celebrate the richness and pleasure of nature and culture alike. The arrangement is a cultural triumph over nature's inhospitable features, and a symbolic triumph of life over death. In the end, this tomb garden offers a perfect foretaste of life beyond death, and idealized nature is brought to perfection by culture.

In the case of the Ryoan-ji garden, the most fundamental ingredients of a natural landscape, mountains and water, and the most fundamental features of nature, its awe-inspiring purity and spontaneity, its simple and fragile beauty, and its ever-changing flow are arranged and cultivated to contemplate the impermanence and moving sadness of nature and culture alike. Like life and death, nature and culture turn out to be two sides of a coin. In fact, both nature and culture are about life and death. In the end, this pleasure garden offers a perfect taste of life accepting death, and whilst idealized nature is brought to perfection by culture, neither nature nor culture turn out to be ideal or perfect.

4 Conclusion

The roles that Islam and Zen Buddhism play in the religious meaning making of these two classical gardens turn out to be strikingly similar, in that they confirm rather than transform other layers of cultural meaning.

The Taj Mahal garden starts off with a cultural notion of nature that draws on inhospitable nature being transformed into fertile agriculture, on nature productively exploited to the point of becoming abundant with fruits, flowers and shade. Culture idealizes nature by heightening nature's potential and by transforming nature into an ideal state of natural perfection. Islam explicitly confirms this notion of nature by presenting this very ideal state of natural perfection as God's purpose with nature.

The Ryoan-ji garden starts off with a cultural notion of nature that draws on the basic ingredients of a (non-agricultural) natural landscape, on mountains and rivers, islands and water, on nature artistically reduced and recycled to the point of becoming abundant with irregularity, spontaneity and transience. Culture idealizes nature by heightening nature's awesomeness and by transforming culture into a reshaped form of nature's imperfection. Zen Bud-

dhism explicitly confirms this notion of nature by presenting culture's capacity to become an integral part of nature as the mental capacity of humans to realize their originally enlightened state of being.

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