

# Sensuous gardens of Suzhou

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

It is said in China that "gardens south of the Yangtze are the finest on earth, but Suzhou's are the finest of them all."

Located in fertile Jiangsu province and only 50 km from bustling Shanghai, Suzhou has long been rich ground for garden development. Its inhabitants have pursued these ends passionately.

Gardens in China can basically be put into two categories: large and grandiose ones constructed by Imperial leaders, and smaller, more intimate affairs, usually the work of wealthy merchants or public officials. Suzhou's and those below the Yangtze are this second type.

In terms of plain enjoyment, the emperor's creations can hardly compare to Suzhou's charms. Simple, enchanting, and completely free of the excess of royalty, a trip through Suzhou's gardens shows a side of Chinese life that is too often forgotten in the country's rapidly changing society.

Walking around these wooded labyrinths is a pleasure to the senses. One gets the feeling, moving through the maze of halls, rockeries, lakes and plant life, that one has entered a different world.

A huge variety of scenes is put into an area that appears neither completely natural nor altogether man-made. The artificial and the natural are brought together, and done so in a remarkably limited area.

Of course the scholarly mood that once prevailed in these gardens is hard to find now. Since the Communist takeover all the gardens have become public and there is not much room for quiet contemplation among the hordes



**WATER PAVILION** of the Wang Shi Yuan or "Garden of the Fisherman" in Suzhou. PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

of camera-toting sightseers. Still, it's hard not to be effected by these tiny worlds and the care taken with every small detail.

Suzhou's reputation as the "City of Gardens" stems largely from sheer volume. The area has always been a prosperous one and there have been no shortage of wealthy landowners around with a yen for gardens. At one time as many as 200 filled the city. Even now, despite the demise of a good number of

these, there are still plenty to choose from.

The largest and most famous is Zhuo Zheng Yuan or "The Humble Administrator's Gardens." The title would appear to be an official translation as it has also been called "The Garden of Inept Administration" and "The Sick-of-Politics Politician's Garden."

Fortunately, the garden itself shows none of this semantic uncertainty.

It spreads over 4 hectares

and is exceptional in that water covers three-fifths of that area. Lakes in Chinese gardens are built to contrast with boulders. They are feminine, the Yin, while the boulders, which are supposed to represent mountains, are masculine, the Yang.

Water definitely is the centerpiece here, as most of the pavilions open onto the lake. As privately owned areas, pavilions were like the rooms of a house, acting as libraries, bedrooms, even kitchens. At times the owner would use them to entertain guests or, if he was feeling inspired, compose poetry.

Encircling the lake and pavilions are huge rocks brought in from nearby Lake Taihu. These boulders come in all shapes and sizes and are gouged with a fascinating assortment of craters. They are unique to the gardens of this area.

Zhuo Zheng Yuan, like all south Chinese gardens, represents essentially a recreation of the environment around it. Mountains and lakes stood at the forefront of the people's view of nature. Grass and flatlands were part of the northern steppes, home of invading barbarians, and not something that they wanted to add to a place of quiet contemplation. Indeed a Chinese critic once said of British gardens that the grass "while pleasing to a cow, could hardly engage the intellect of human beings."

Early Chinese gardens aimed to do more than engage the intellect. Mountains and lakes, it was believed at the time, held the power of the immortals. Miniaturization gave individuals, or at least the Taoist monks that created them, access to such powers. It is thinking that we can also see in the bonsai tradition in Japan.

Probably the best example of this miniaturized world in Suzhou is Wang Shi Yuan, or "Garden of the Fisherman." Here one is easily fooled into thinking there is more to this place than the half hectare of land mentioned in the guide. Water meanders, then disappears out of sight creating a sense of distance. Trees and rocks obscure the surrounding wall, allowing for a greater sense of space. This is actually one of the main goals of a Chinese garden: to decep-