Yaji Garden: Art Under the Sky

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The '*yaji garden'* is a physical embodiment of the traditional Chinese mode of art connoisseurship. Meaning literally an 'elegant gathering', it also has the implications of a 'literati gathering'. Traditionally, the *yaji* is a communion of artistic friends and associates, who meet to enjoy art and performances in private gardens attached to private residences. The gardens typically contain artificial mountains and brooks, created in the spirit of Chinese landscape painting. Ideally, one would prefer to build a garden around an actual idyllic site in nature, instead of constructing artificial rockery.

The origin of *yaji* is ancient, but the concept and practice have had a continuous history until the present day, and even in modern times it is practised within Chinese culture, albeit in slightly new modes. In general, *yaji* may justifiably be identified as the archetypal 'exhibition practice' of pre-modern China. The most celebrated *yaji* event was probably the gathering at the Orchid Pavilion in year 353 AD, at which Wang Xizhi (canonised in the seventh century as the Sage of Calligraphy by Tang-dynasty Emperor Taizong) wrote the essay "Preface to the Anthology of Orchid Pavilion". This piece of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi remains the paradigmatic copy model for every serious student of calligraphy.

For a modern audience unfamiliar with the tradition, it is important to examine the questions of what precisely happens during the 'literati gathering' and what are its implications for the experience of art? Does literati connoisseurship as exemplified in the *yaji* practice have different expectations from both the encounter with art and the artworks themselves, than does the modern museum?

There are two components that constitute the '*Yaji Garden*' experience: the *yaji* activity and the site of the garden; if we translate this experience to the modern museum, these components would correspond to the visitor's experience and the architectural edifice with its exhibition display. Here one sees a

difference in emphasis: the success of a *yaji* experience is contingent on the gathering, and the success of the event depends as much on the art being displayed as it relies on the dynamics generated by the participants. For the museum the strength is its static display, while the occasional events and 'happenings' that appear within and outside its domain are collected as ephemeral artworks demonstrating various 'processes'. Compared to the yaji's emphasis on participants' experience, the modern museum's identity clearly resembles an edifice of display.

Seen in the light of the modern museum, the salient feature of the *Yaji garden* stands apart as an apparatus for engendering the 'aesthetic moment'. The Chinese word for such a moment of 'inspiration' is *xing* (pronounced 'shing') or *qi xing* (pronounced 'chi shing'), and *qi xing* means to be 'inspired' to creativity. In Confucius' anthology, the *Book of Poetry*, *xing,* or inspiration*,* is one of three principle modes of writing poetry. Typically, a *yaji* gathering starts with an invitation from a 'host' who provides a pretext for the event, which may be a seasonal holiday, appreciation of a seasonal flower, sharing of new (or newly acquired) paintings, or antiques. The 'guests' would be expected to share their art, and take part in the connoisseurship by 'artistic' responses such as composing poetry and commentary, or simply engaging in conversation.

The *yaji* event takes place in a garden and its attached residence, usually accompanied by music and other cultivated activities like the appreciation of incense, seasonal flowers and teas. In such an ambient surrounding participants are expected to be alert to the artistic experience and form an immediate engagement. This is very different from the emphasis of the modern museum on passive visuality. *Yaji* is a tactile, immersive experience: the Chinese traditional painting format of hanging and rolled scrolls, which requires handling by the viewer, is indicative of the spirit of physical, tactile engagement. The demand on both 'host' and 'guest' to articulate their aesthetic response dispels the passive spectator, and conspires instead to bring out the 'aesthetic moment'.

Major historical *yaji* gatherings are remembered by anthologies of poetry and essays that result from the events, which arguably form

a loose record of China's 'history of exhibition' before the age of exhibition (in the modern sense) arrived in China in the first decade of the 20th century. Unlike salons and cultural gatherings in the West, which have remained at the periphery of the western paradigm of museum exhibition, the *yaji* always formed the recognised locus of connoisseurship and display of 'fine art', meaning 'literati art' in China. One major reason for this is due to the continuity of its format, which has established a quasi-institutional status for itself. Another reason is its ties to a specific type of site, the *yaji garden*. A legitimate art institutional site means the power to endorse and legitimise 'art' as such, which is the function served by the *yaji garden*. However, unlike modern institutions, the *yaji garden* has no official status and only satisfies a very loose functional definition. Not only is the garden at most times a private space for pleasure, literati gatherings do not actually guarantee recognition of artworks apart from the private circulation that might or might not build their public reputation. In what ways, then, is the *yaji garden* 'institutional' in a way that may compare with the white cube museum?

The modern museum is a social institution created to serve the modern 'public', a creature of the civic urban world endowed with its own social regime and benefits. A 'citizen', as a member of the 'public', is entitled by 'right' to modern institutions of social services, and this 'right' is exactly the term of democracy not granted the pre-modern Chinese. However, in the modern museum system, the 'public' in general does not share in the legitimation of artworks; the right of legitimation is reserved for the art 'professionals'. By contrast, the *yaji* gathering is a private event, and the 'audience' is invited guests. The relation between the organiser and participants is 'host' and 'guest'. Historically the artistic authority of *yaji* gatherings relied on the reputation of the participants, much like the consensus of today's 'art circle' and, like the modern 'art circle' of 'cultural intellectuals', they shared a common knowledge base and comparable social status as 'literati'. What is different here is the nature (politically and culturally) of the literati. Whatever their occupation or social circumstance, the literati were of the same 'class' (here referring to those sharing a similar worldview) of the learned that constituted the cultural critical sector as well as those wielding power in office. In China's pre-modern days, up to the first decade of the 20th century, artistically minded scholar-officials

would host *yaji* parties, and a common villager would expect his district governor capable of poetry as part of his claim to office. In the pre-modern *yaji garden*, through the constituency of its members, art and politics met on the ground of aesthetics. Although the *yaji garden* is not an official institution, within its walls artworks are legitimated by reputable participants. Significantly, in terms of art, the yaji garden's legitimacy as 'institution' is more by right of customary practice than right of law. Events hosted in the *yaji garden* might be called 'institutionalised happenings', wherein artworks are provoked to 'perform' their function as 'art' through evoking aesthetic responses in the form of individual articulation.

The site of the *yaji* gathering, the garden, is constructed to be conducive to the experience of art, suitable for 'teasing out' the 'aesthetic moment'. What this implies is: not only should the garden embody the terms of aesthetics of Chinese fine art, it is also designed as a site for opening up the artistic imagination. The traditional term for aesthetic imagination is *yijing*, meaning the 'intentional realm', or 'aesthetic realm'. As a secluded site removed from interference of the mundane world, the garden's 'realm of aesthetics' liberates the mind to partake in the livingness of 'nature' and the dynamics of the cosmos. The garden is built to evoke an idyllic natural site, the same principle used in landscape painting. In an ideal situation, the garden should be a catalyst for linking with the cosmos.

One might loosely claim that the aim of literati art represents a human pursuit of the cosmic realm through connecting with nature and great artworks of the past and present. Art is experienced in the garden with the garden as witness and reminder that livingness means the pleasure of communion with creatures and things of the world. As a famous twelfth-century century poem says, "birds on the branches are my friends/petals drifting on the pond make fine literature". The *yaji garden* is a site for art that aspires to communion with nature among friends who share this appreciation. The culture of interactive connoisseurship is reflected in the attitude of treatment of antiquities: old masterworks are not simply venerated as objects of the past, but brought 'up to date' through the tradition of continuous commentaries and poetry that are attached as addendum to the original artwork. This is the reason for the numerous collectors' seals on old Chinese master paintings

and calligraphy. By contrast with the modern museum, which hastens to historicise (or museum-ise) artworks, the literati connoisseur's practice of incorporating fresh artistic responses into old artworks demonstrates a resistance against 'museum-isation'. The attitude is that a relevant artwork should be a living project.

Implicit in the *yaji garden*'s practice is a view of art fundamentally different from the traditional European aesthetics of 're-presentation'. *Yijing* (intentional/aesthetic realm) implies a pursuit that in principle takes into account subjective participation; self-discovery is integral to unveiling the mystery of the world. For the audience, not only does it confront the viewer with his own experience, it engages all the senses. The *yaji garden* is an immersive experience designed to provide a congenial condition to evoke the intended *yijing*. *Yijing* takes its strength from powers greater than the isolated artwork, and returns art to the cosmic ('nature') context from which it arose.

To enjoy art under the sky is the pleasure of the y*aji garden*. Traditional painting and calligraphy are in formats designed for the library rather than the wall, mostly mounted as horizontal or vertical rolled scrolls or book albums, made for handling by the viewer. The format presumes fine art connoisseurship to be a personal reflective process referencing the experience of literature; it is symptomatic that Chinese terminology for art appreciation uses terms such as 'reading', 'playing' or 'enjoying' (*du, wan, shang*). To bring this art into the garden is to share personal experience under congenial circumstances, like bringing a good book into the park to meet friends. Time of day and seasonal elements make the experience particular; in contrast to the religiosity of a modern museum, where the halo of spotlight (intimating 'eternity') both fixes the artwork as an icon of worship, and transfixes the respectful viewer, light in the *yaji garden* is dependent on the sky. The natural condition and delight of the garden not only direct the viewer to art but also to the cultural memory of transcendent Heaven and spirituality associated with mountains. Mountain as a realm of the immortals (in written form the Chinese word for 'immortal' is a composite of the characters for 'mountain' and 'person') is the metaphor for garden rockery and also for landscape art. Viewing a landscape painting within the garden's landscape is not the equivalent of looking at a portrait in

the company of the person; the point here is not to re-present or idealise, but to seek a way to engage and enter the mystery of nature.

As pointed out by Hong Kong scholar Chiu Kwong-chiu (in conversation), the liberal use of the metaphor of *jie* ('borrowing', 'lending the strength of', 'making an excuse of') in the literature of art suggests the fleeting pleasure of 'borrowing' from powers beyond (which includes exemplary works of early masters). Perhaps it is because to access the 'aesthetic realm' (in order to go beyond the mundane) an artist/connoisseur requires the help of powers beyond one's ken, and illicit 'borrowings' such as the garden designer's 'borrowing sceneries from beyond the walls' (*jie jing*) and the artist's 'borrowing the moon's reflection in the pond' prompt him to return to the 'scene of the crime'. In this sense the landscape of the garden for the artist /creator could be interpreted as a site of transgression where the boundary of hidden secrets is trespassed. It is a site of cultural mnemonic.

Given its particular characteristics in the practices of connoisseurship and display, how does the *yaji garden* fit in the order of contemporary art institutions? Or asking the question in reverse: how may the contemporary museum be problematised by the *yaji garden*? The contemporary museum is complex and rich in implications as it takes inspiration from multiple historical institutions, and today its voracious creativity also prompts it to gradually take over functions served by other types of cultural institutions.

The religiosity of the museum experience is evidently a legacy of the Christian church, and artworks are made sacred through apparatuses borrowed from church experience. The predilection of the white cube toward visuality is also derived from a religious mode of spiritual worship, and this is essential to the modern museum experience. Christian eschatology finds its way quietly into the history museum, transformed into assumptions about the linearity and ethos of history. The implication of art as a source of 'knowledge production' finds kinship with the Enlightenment, especially its institution of the *wunderkammer*. What has been most criticised by post-colonial analysis is the hidden hegemonic agenda of the museum of anthropology and museum of world

cultures. They continue to exercise authority lent by the ancient museum of imperial conquests, which imposed imperial cultural order on civilisations of the conquered. In the early modern era the museum of loot merged with modern science to become the museum of anthropology, but implications of the imposition of cultural order have remained, which in an oblique way continue to endorse the modern museum of art. Today the cultural specificity of the white cube is becoming increasingly apparent, and to its credit, the museum not only embraces the richness of its diverse ancestry and also, through sustained efforts to resolve the legacy of imperial history, has now evolved into a platform of creative richness and openness, so much so that the contemporary museum finds itself being adopted globally.

How the *yaji garden* may thrive in contemporary times remains a challenge for practitioners. As a contemporary institution the *yaji* garden requires a critical appraisal of its apparatuses, especially its cultural specificity, and reconsider itself in terms of a new global institution open to the world. The special dynamism and openness of contemporary museums benefit from a particular European tradition of iconoclasm, which emphasises the ‘new’ and the ‘radical’. And as an open forum for negotiation of ideologies, the contemporary platform keeps alive the memory of the Greek agora, emphasising democratic participation. How the *yaji garden* may offer fresh possibilities while maintaining dialogue with its historical legacy will depend on the creative adaptability of its adherents.

An interesting place to start is to investigate how ‘art’ is defined in the *yaji garden*. It is well known that Chinese ‘fine’ art is heavily prejudiced towards the written word; after painting and calligraphy, seal carving is probably the only legitimate addition to Chinese ‘fine arts’ in recent centuries. But the *yaji* gathering also brings together diverse ‘artistic’ activities: music, performance, appreciation of antiquities and curiosities, writing poetry, enjoyment of incense and tea, and, importantly, lively conversation. In other words, the experience encompasses the intellect and all sensible faculties. This suggests a perimeter of art that is expandable through creative interaction. There is a hint of the spirit of the *wunderkammer* in the literati’s predilection for ‘curiosities’, manifest in the connoisseurship of exotic rocks and roots. The interest in things ‘exotic’ comes from a genealogy of knowledge

other than the Enlightenment, and here the boundary separating natural things and ‘art’ is negotiable. The objective world is not radically outside the domain of subjectivity. In the literati studio, ‘craft’ transforms into ‘art’ if it is perceived to incarnate with natural powers.

Unlike the museum, the *yaji garden* is an art site without an archival collection. The modern museum derives power from its authority over archival history: it justifies its collecting by asserting an artwork’s novelty and its departure from earlier art, but the novelty of ‘new’ creativity may only be demonstrated through historical precedence. Implicit in the authority to endorse the new is the legitimation of ‘novelty’ as a necessary criterion for ‘art’. Built into this structure is a teleological bias towards the linearity of historical development. The *yaji garden* is not concerned with novel originality; its claim to authority comes from its metaphoric relation to cosmos/nature, and reference to art history is less about evolution than exemplary models to be admired. As the *yaji garden* is not dependent on the principle of accumulation and progression, its success is contingent upon the quality and reputation of its current participants, so its openness and freedom from the tyranny of ‘the new’ likewise accounts for its weakness as an institution.

It is a moot point to speculate on the *yaji garden*’s potential as a platform for socially critical art, a role in which the contemporary museum distinguishes itself. The contemporary museum is only truly radical when it goes beyond the purely intellectual and cultural, and ventures to negotiate sensitive ideological-political positions; this appears to be the underlying point of attraction of this hugely successful modern institution. If the European tradition of iconoclasm and critique of secular law is its original inspiration, then the institutional structure underlying its mentality must be Europe’s parallel (and contesting) governmental powers of State and Religion. The radicality of the modern museum is a legacy of Church power, which has always claimed a legal position above that of secular law, and offers the space of spirituality for political critique. To be placed above the law, metaphorically if not legally, allows the contemporary museum to become the platform for difficult ideological and cultural negotiations.

How may one understand this modern role of the museum in terms of the *yaji garden*? The contestation between God and Caesar is not a Chinese tradition, but between scholar-officials and the court there is a continuous history. The nature of the literati in China was not the same as that of modern intellectuals; the former were by training devoted to public affairs, but unlike the critical intellectual, those who succeeded in public examinations could move on to official administrative positions. There was the theoretical possibility for the literati in realising their social-political ideals. This means the scholar class, artists included, shared a common worldview and looked upon affairs of the state to be their calling. The *yaji garden* provided a site where the literati gathered outside of the concerns of worldly affairs, but worldly affairs was never far from their concerns. Although the cosmic reference of a garden's 'mountain and water' (*shan shui*, Chinese term for 'landscape') carries no political weight, it keeps worldly affairs in perspective. One may say mindfulness about cosmic order keeps the human order in check, and mindfulness about the natural world also makes a sympathetic partner of today's environmentalist green movement.

Many well-known political activities did actually happen in the garden, a late dynastic example being the nineteenth-century revolutionary group *Xiao Dao Hui*, who plotted rebellion against the Qing dynasty in the famous Yuyuan Garden next to Shanghai's City Temple. However, purely as a site, the garden carries only faint memories as a space outside the law; the clearest reference to this privilege can be traced to the age of the famous Orchid Pavilion gathering in 353 AD. This space was the imperial garden Hualin Yuan, situated at the northeast corner of the imperial palace (incidentally the layout of palace grounds was similar to the Forbidden City in Beijing today). Between the 3rd and 6th century AD, Hualin Yuan served as a private site of pleasure for the emperor to relax with his ministers, but incongruously, it was here in the garden that he also customarily exercised his sovereign right of granting royal pardon to convicted criminals--a special privilege that stood above national law. There are no records explaining the choice of the imperial garden as the site for exercising this supra-judicial power, particularly as Hualin Yuan was situated just to the north of the court of justice.

Apart from its democratic appeal to the public, for the museum institution to qualify as ‘modern’ depends equally on the rationalisation of its profession. Increasingly in recent decades, compartmentalised professionalism in the art system and the museum has reduced the holistic experience of art to specialised knowledge. Specialisation rationalises the art world into the fields of ‘artist’, ‘critic’, ‘curator’, ‘audience’ and ‘market’, with the implication that aesthetic authority rests with the ‘critics’ and ‘curators’ as ‘aesthetic professionals’. This reflects today’s realities; with globalisation and the expansion of the art field, the proliferation of exhibitions makes it impossible for the layman to get adequately acquainted with latest developments, and the curator now ironically also takes on the role of art’s professional audience.

The professionalisation of the art sector in modern times shares a fate with the rest of the capitalist world. When the audience is not taken into account at the site of exhibition production, the market inadvertently moves in, making itself the principal space for public participation. Furthermore, in recent decades the market has been aided by another turn in artistic trends, which is that of multi-culturalism. The identity politics of multi-culturalism has been the intellectual strategy deployed to splinter and contain the legitimate claims of post-colonialism, which complains of hegemonic oppression by the intellectual machinery of previous colonial powers. Multi-culturalism agrees strategically with the complaints of the subaltern (of hegemonic oppression), and conveniently proceeds to acknowledge the diversity of cultures by putting each in its own pigeon-hole of cultural identity, without letting go of its own dominant position of arbitrator. The adverse effect of this strategy is that it implies that cultural knowledge is fundamentally insulate within its own cultural-historical confines, and art is trapped as a result of its cultural identity. The uncertain success of global platforms in dealing with this form of cultural politics has given market consensus the opportunity to become the only universal reference. The sudden boom of the market of contemporary art in parts of the world previously uncharted by significant art activities is both a blessing and a worry; blessing in that new creativity finds a broader audience, and a worry in that art may turn into yet another product of the ‘creative industry’.

The historical model of the *yaji garden* offers a perspective to reflect on the art of contemporary times. The phenomenon of the recent proliferation of biennials is an interesting case. New biennials hosted by urban centres from around the globe are event-based, and they are formed principally around the interaction between artists, curators and specialists. Although the public is welcome and encouraged, yet they are no more than adjunct spectators. The biennial is a successful step in moving beyond the monolithic museum, and it may perhaps be provocatively interpreted as a form of mega-*yaji* (without the garden and its cosmic implications). At the biennial, aesthetic interaction between artists, curators and specialists take precedence over the authority of the typical modern museum, and there is no attempt to impose a consensus; diverse cultural positions are respected for their ability to engage the event.

While the *yaji garden* continues to evolve within its traditional confines, it hopefully brings a fresh context for thinking about dynamic, event-based practices of display and art experience. As a laboratory for aesthetic sensibilities and incubator of artistic imagination, the on-going project of *yaji garden* should remain an open invitation.