



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: WATER

Whether trickling, flowing, spraying, foaming, splashing,
in rivers or oceans,
Water is the very blood and marrow of Heaven and Earth.
Zi Yuan Hua Zhuan (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting)

Water is the Circulatory System of the World

Within *Lan Su Yuan*—the Portland Classical Chinese Garden—the circulation of water supports many forms of life. In the center of the garden is Zither Lake that is home to *jin yu* (gold fish) and *lian hua*—one of the many names for types of water lilies and lotus flowers. Great blue herons that dive for their food in the waters of the nearby Willamette and Columbia Rivers often make successful visits to the garden pond for their fishing trips. During the spring, autumn and winter, rain is common in this corner of the Pacific Northwest (yearly rainfall=37 inches); all this water supports the 500 species of garden plants, the majority of which are plants native to China. The water falling down the rock mountains on the north side of the garden, supplies the energy of water in constant motion.

Water Symbols in the Chinese Garden: From Dragon-fish to Strings of Pearls

Chinese culture uses many forms and symbols of the vital element of water. Architects, engineers, designers and craftsmen from Suzhou, China—Portland, Oregon’s sister city—carefully planned for water to be used throughout the garden. Dragon fish—the guardians of rivers and protectors against fire—appear to leap off the roof atop the *Hall of Brocade Clouds*. Attached to the roof edges, drip tiles channel rain onto plants; the water often forms curtains of raindrops, or ‘strings of pearls.’ Along one side of Zither Lake, the *Painted Boat in Misty Rain* pavilion gives the feeling of being anchored on shore yet rocked by the moving ripples. On clear nights, the moon can be viewed from the *Moon-locking Pavilion* as a glassy spotlight in the center of the lake. Throughout this peaceful city garden, water is a focal point—one of the five essential elements in a classical Chinese garden.

Following the Path of Least Resistance; Wearing Down the Hardest Stone

Within Chinese culture, water has always been valued for its life-supporting qualities. China’s most well-known and respected teacher, Confucius, considered water to possess qualities that may serve as a model for human behavior. Confucius (551-479 BCE) studied the nature of water and drew attention to the soft and yielding qualities of this element: The philosopher noted that flowing water can both yield and overcome any obstacle set in its path. Furthermore, overtime water will wear down the hardest stone. In the teachings of Confucius, wise people are encouraged to observe and learn from the virtues of water.

Try to predict Confucius’ observations of water before reading the next paragraph.

Confucius Advises the Virtuous Person to Study Water

According to Confucius, wise people can learn about themselves by studying and reflecting on the nature of water. Confucius is quoted as saying:

Water extends everywhere and gives everything life, without acting; water is like virtue.

Its stream descends downward, twisting and turning, but always following the same principle; water is like rightness.

Used as a level, it is always even; water is like law.

That which goes to it and enters into it, is cleansed and made pure; water is like the transformation of goodness.

In twisting around ten thousand times but always going eastward, water is like will.

That is the reason that when a wise gentleman sees a great river, he will always look upon it.

(Attributed to Confucius—adapted from *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* by Sarah Allan)

Try to summarize what Confucius meant when he instructed the wise person to study water.

Waterways of China Have Historically Circulated Culture and Sustenance

There is yet another life-supporting aspect of water that can be found in the Portland Classical Chinese Garden. The pavilion, *Painted Boat in Misty Rain*, is designed like one of the many boats that have traveled for centuries along the 1,794 kilometers (*how many miles does this equal?*) of China's Grand Canal, the world's longest human-made river. Serving a purpose similar to the human circulatory system's network of blood vessels, this major transportation artery of China was designed, excavated and built during many dynasties. Its purpose throughout history has remained constant: to circulate food and goods from the fertile lands and manufacturing centers in southeast China to the emperor's capitals in the north. Since China's major rivers flow west to east, the Grand Canal was created to be the transportation and communication system in China carrying a two-way flow of people, food, products, knowledge and news around the country.



Painted Boat in Misty Rain

Suzhou—Portland's sister city located in China's southern Jiangsu Province—has been a well-known center of sericulture or silk production for over 2,000 years. Located in the Yangtze River Delta—'The Land of Fish and Rice'—this region is largely fertile farmland covered with channels of water linked with the Grand Canal. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, boat-filled canals transported grain and silk northward to serve the needs of the emperor's court in Beijing. The ease of transport also enabled the emperors to lead inspection tours to southern China. In the Qing Dynasty, Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong traveled along the Grand Canal's waterways to make a total of 12 trips to southern China. Along the way they witnessed the lives of the local people, inspected schools and, most importantly, checked on the large-scale irrigation and flood control projects so necessary to expand the amount of crops needed to feed China's growing population. Water has long been central to the circulation of Chinese culture across time and place.

Research: How is the Grand Canal used in modern China today?