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## People and Nature: Xuefeng Chen's cross-cultural garden

Rosalind Silvester

### *Xuefeng Chen and her 'jardin imaginaire'*

Born in Yunnan, South-West China, in 1975, Xuefeng Chen<sup>1</sup> grew up in the countryside of the province and completed her studies of Fine Art in its capital, Kunming, in 2000. She left China in 2001 for Frankfurt, moving then to Strasbourg and graduating from the *École supérieure des arts décoratifs de Strasbourg* in 2006. She then settled in Lyon, France, and 2021 marked her twentieth year away from her homeland. As a consequence of this movement, her art is nourished by two cultures: her maternal one and the western culture of her current, daily life. These poles, 'terres d'enracinement', comprise 'la trame et la chaîne de [son] parcours artistique'.<sup>2</sup> In 2018 she began the large-scale art installation *Bô – le jardin imaginaire*, located in a former Comblanchian stone quarry in Villars-Fontaine, near Dijon in the region of Burgundy.<sup>3</sup> She has so far created six of the planned twenty-one sculptures of other-worldly and colourful creatures, between two and five metres high, which will populate, by the project's end in 2028, the main arena of La Karrière's open-air site, her imaginary garden. Describing the sculptures as 'de[s] créatures symboliques qui émergent de la nature' in an art gallery without walls,<sup>4</sup> Chen reveals both an ecocentric aesthetics and a personal philosophy of going beyond boundaries, whether concerning her cultural and artistic influences or material practice.

The village where Xuefeng Chen grew up bordered Tibet and she recalls that the inhabitants followed customs based on 'primitive' cults, going back to the origins of humankind.<sup>5</sup> At the centre of these customs was the belief that all things, such as the sun, moon, earth, water, air, fire, mountain, trees and flowers, have a spirit. Strongly influenced by this tradition of respecting nature, she confirms that *Bô* will be '[u]n lieu qui réunit de multiples espaces avec des plantes, des insectes et des hommes. Un lieu de récréation entre

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<sup>1</sup> The artist tends to adopt the Western convention of giving her first name, Xuefeng, before her surname, Chen, which is contrary to Chinese convention. As such, we will respect and replicate her onomastic choice.

<sup>2</sup> Xuefeng Chen, *Xuefeng Chen* (unpublished), 2018, 1–4 (p. 2). The artist gave this biographical text to the author of this article in advance of her participation in the author's conference, 'Chinese Traits, Francophone Lines: The Value of Transcultural Creativity', Queen's University Belfast, 21–22 November 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Xuefeng Chen uses a second site to 'expérimenter les idées et concepts du projet BÔ', according to her website (<<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022]). It is located at Virieu Le Petit, 20 km from Lac Bourget, near to the Forêt du Grand Colombier, Rhône-Alpes.

<sup>4</sup> Arnaud Morel, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Xuefeng Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

homme et nature'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, life in the village revolved around various colourful ceremonies in which participants wore traditional costumes and created highly decorated objects. Without a doubt, these vibrant objects and costumes have had a lasting effect on her and her art. She refers to them as 'véritables symboles de bonheur' and has sought to reproduce the memory of this happiness throughout her life,<sup>7</sup> even after moving to Europe and focusing her attention on understanding the practices of contemporary western art and learning to implement them. As the original and primary influence on her art, they contribute to its naivety, in modernist terms, as well as hark back to folk tradition.

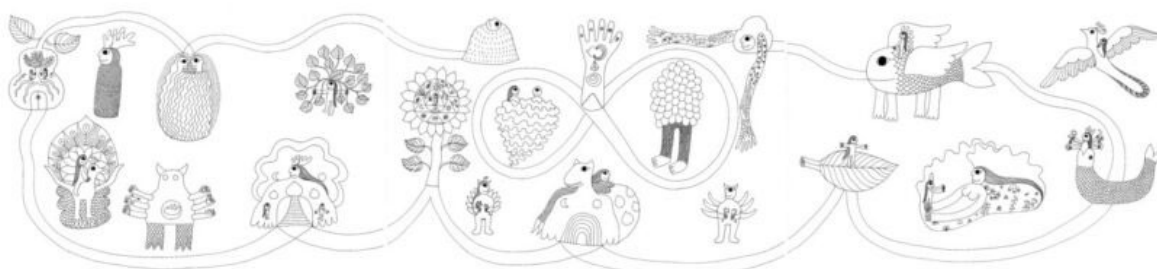


Figure 1. Sketch of *Bô – le jardin imaginaire*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>7</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>8</sup> The image comes from <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr>> [accessed 1 June 2022]. All images in this article are reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and La Karrière.



Figure 2. © Xuefeng Chen<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3. © Xuefeng Chen and Yves Bourget.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The image appears on <<http://lakarriere.fr>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>10</sup> The photo was sent to the author by the artist in an email on 22 September 2022.

Between Chen's sketch of the planned sculptures (Figure 1), her models (Figure 2) and six finished sculptures (Figure 3), we see the beginnings of an imaginary garden featuring vaguely familiar, yet uncategorisable, forms in brightly contrasting colours – green, yellow, pink, blue, white, red.<sup>11</sup> It is tempting to interpret the blue and pink figures as male and female, placed either together amidst crinoline-style swirls or separately on top of an animal-like creature, and to construe the two-headed white figure as lovers, facing each other as though readying for a kiss or embrace (see Figure 2). Vegetation appears in the form of a rainbow-coloured tree and a convolvulus-shaped plant (Figure 1). There are sculptures that seem to be inspired by creatures: a whale with four legs, a fish spurting out a green, horned figure from its mouth, 'My Little Pony'-type horses, a snail with curls for a carapace. Then there are fanciful beings belonging to an alien planet or prehistoric life: something resembling a bunch of grapes or multiple breasts on two legs;<sup>12</sup> patterned or tasseled green and white domes; limbless creatures with horns (Figure 3). If these beings represent the beginnings of life, the amoeba and primal organisms that are only partially evolved, then the animal- and human-like forms are the more complex additions that supplement plant life. The uncertainty about what these figures actually are and the return to origins that they symbolize point to Chen's preoccupation with certain existential questions, 'd'où venons-nous? Qui sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?', whose answers give meaning to our existence.<sup>13</sup> Such indeterminate introspection recalls the 'incertitude identitaire' of other Franco-Chinese artists and the tension they experience between being Chinese and being universal.<sup>14</sup>

Each sculpture in the garden is independent but linked to the others by both physical proximity and symbolism, according to Chen's description that employs, significantly, an analogy to nature: 'Elles communiquent entre elles, comme une plante le fait par son réseau de rhizomes.'<sup>15</sup> The multiple paths, as shown in Figure 1, provide the visitor with different routes between the installations and some will be supplemented with special effects, allowing interaction with natural elements like light, wind and rain.<sup>16</sup> That Chen's imagined creatures are near to each other implies that one species is not too far from another, and this

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<sup>11</sup> On Chen's website, she gives the titles of some sculptures, but it is unclear which title is attributed to which sculpture. Significantly, they all refer to either nature or life: 'L'esprit de l'arbre', 'Mémoire de feu', 'La source', 'La fleur', 'L'arbre de vie', 'Oiseau de feu', 'Maison des graines', 'Calebasse', 'La feuille', 'Renaissance'. See Morel, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>12</sup> Xuefeng Chen created a very similar sculpture in 2010, although the figure had a seemingly pregnant belly and legs with green fronds.

<sup>13</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo-transmission/>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Silvester and Guillaume Thouroude, *Traits chinois, lignes francophones : Écritures, images, cultures* (Montreal: Presses de l'université de Montréal, 2012), p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Morel, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Morel, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

interdependence of nature appears also in the reference to *Bô* in the work's title, the ancient Chinese tree whose branches produce roots that grow downwards to join its subterranean roots (see Figure 4). It exemplifies very clearly the idea of living organisms being inextricably interconnected with their surroundings. Forming 'une incroyable maison-forêt' that shelters and gives life to plants and creatures, Chen calls it 'l'arbre de vie, symbole de richesse et d'éveil'.<sup>17</sup> On first impression, this reference to *Bô* appears to be the only obvious Chinese marker in Chen's imaginary garden as it seems to have little in common with the design philosophy of classic Chinese gardens, such as the renowned ones at Suzhou and Hangzhou (see Figures 5 and 6). Their use of natural and architectural elements gave rise to metaphorical connotations and created an ideology that helped the owners and visitors to cultivate various types of knowledge. Cultivation of the mind was required to promote an environmental ethics: by learning the correct attitude towards nature, the natural environment could be better protected. Aesthetic appreciation could be attained by contemplating the beauty of the design of buildings and landscapes, as well as the ecological impact of the materials used. The idea of cultivating one's moral character was realised by the use of gardens as places for quiet reflection and the re-balancing of mind and body. We propose that, although very different in form, *Bô: le jardin imaginaire* offers similar opportunities for self-cultivation and, additionally, the possibility of cross-cultural cultivation in a contemporary setting.

In order to reach this conclusion, we first investigate how Xuefeng Chen's installation crosses several artistic genres, drawing on contemporary art, folk crafts and traditional Chinese art, as well as conveying a very personal imaginary. Digging down, we uncover the ways in which *Bô* conveys elements of both Western influences and Chinese culture, realising her principal objective of 'inventer [s]on propre chemin à la croisée des civilisations et des savoir-faire propres aux cultures'.<sup>18</sup> The possibility of carving out her own way echoes the Taoist belief in the transcendence of binary positions, '[des] couples d'opposés complémentaires', to open up onto a third way.<sup>19</sup> We show, then, how the installation has its roots in the long-established connections between Chinese landscapes, especially gardens, and the art of painting – a transmedial conception of art, in other words – although it does not seem, at first sight, to have much in common with classic Chinese gardens. This leads us to

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<sup>17</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p. 41.

explore the parallels between viewing a painting and viewing a garden, as well as the practice of the creator's self being reflected in his/her creation, whether garden or artwork. By examining this historico-cultural context further, we unearth some similarities and differences between Chen's imagined garden and traditional Chinese gardens, in particular those created and enjoyed by the literati who elevated, and contributed greatly to, garden design.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Chen uses rocks, observation spots and routes to create a space that promotes the Taoist concept of *yóu* (游), 'to wander',<sup>21</sup> a complex term denoting both physical and spiritual movement between landscapes and genres. It expresses her playful nature, along with her eagerness to interact with others and to bring others into contact with each other, resulting in a freedom that transcends boundaries. Consequently, we grow the idea that her imaginary garden provides a site and opportunity for public, cross-cultural encounters and 'everyday multiculturalism' that have current social, cultural and aesthetic purposes.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 4. 美丽德宏, 'Dehong beauty', from WeChat <http://m.khly114.com/ticket/925.html>

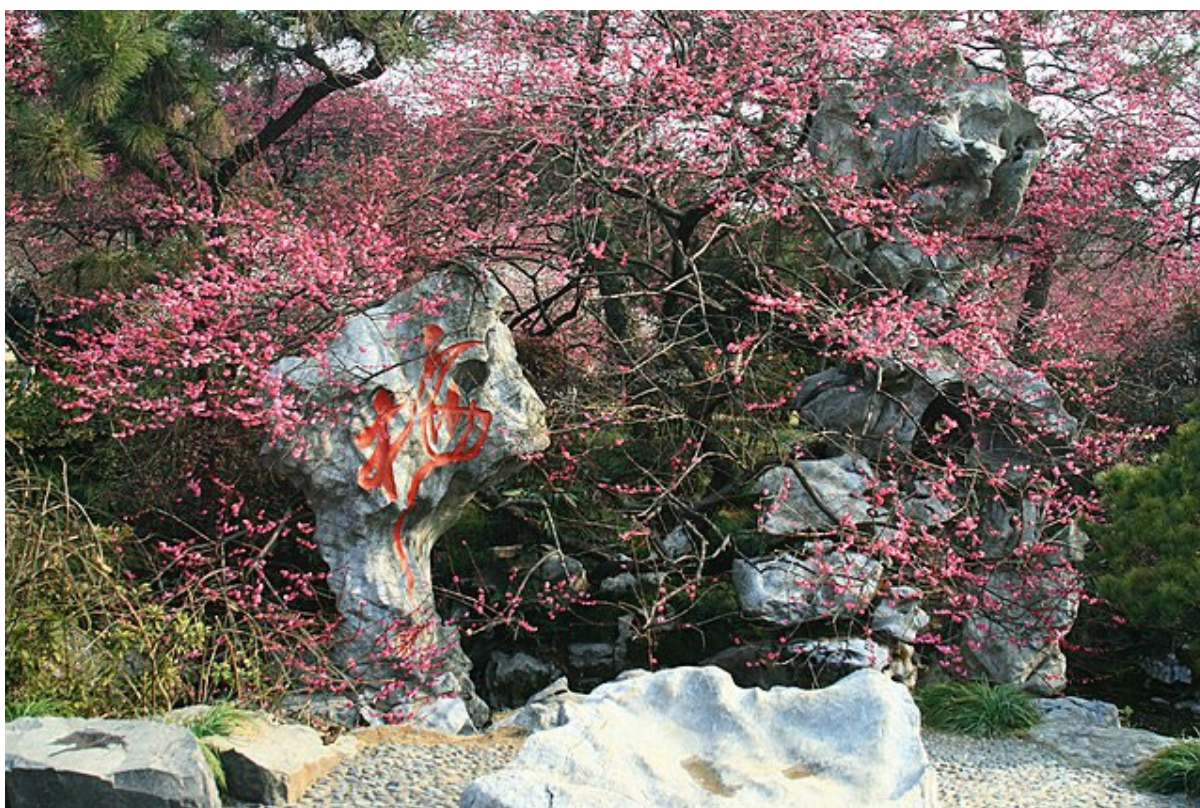
<sup>20</sup> Members of the literati, in both China and Japan, were usually scholars and ranked officials whose art works revealed their cultivation and personal sentiments rather than demonstrating their technical skills. The concept of literati painters was first formulated in China in the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), but became firmly embedded in Chinese culture during the Ming dynasty by Dong Qichang, a painter, calligrapher, politician and art theorist. The literati were at the top of the ideal Confucian social hierarchy, followed by farmers, artisans and merchants at the bottom.

<sup>21</sup> I am very grateful to my colleague Liang Wang for his help with checking pinyin spellings and the simplified Chinese characters used in this article.

<sup>22</sup> On 'everyday multiculturalism' see Ien Ang, *On not speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. (London: Routledge, 2001); Sophie Watson and Anamik Saha, 'Suburban drifts: Mundane multiculturalism in outer London', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2012, 36, 2016–2034; and Amanda Wise, 'Sensuous multiculturalism: Emotional landscapes of inter-ethnic living in Australian suburbia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2010, 36, 917–37.



Figure 5. Suzhou, Master of Net Garden, Painted Map 2004, 0927 uploaded to Wikimedia Commons on 25 August 2006 by Kanga35.<sup>23</sup>



<sup>23</sup> This image comes from <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/category:master\\_of\\_nets\\_garden#/media/File:20040927-Suzhou\\_MasterOfNetGarden\\_PaintedMap.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/category:master_of_nets_garden#/media/File:20040927-Suzhou_MasterOfNetGarden_PaintedMap.jpg)> [accessed 1 June 2022].



Figure 6. 杭州植物园. 灵峰探梅 (*Hángzhōu Zhíwùyuán Língfēng Tàn Méi*) Hangzhou Botanic Garden: A Visit to the Plum Blossoms at Lingfeng Peak. Uploaded to Wikimedia Commons on 2 March 2011 by zhiyin586@163.com.<sup>24</sup>

### *Transmediality: gardens and the arts*

The garden is a form of art that has long been emblematic of the close relationship between nature and culture, a conjunction that is recognised linguistically in ‘cultura’, the Latin root for both ‘culture’ and ‘cultivation’. The garden has an extensive history of appealing to our creative imagination, having particular significance in several world religions and philosophies. The Garden of Eden in Christianity was the place where God placed the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, and it was the scene of their fall from grace. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World, were attributed to Nebuchadnezzar II and contained the flora and fauna of his wife’s homeland which she missed so much. The Garden of the Hesperides, Hera’s orchard in Greek mythology, contained trees bearing immortality-giving golden apples and it was where both the Golden Fleece and the serpent Ladon were located. Gardens have not only provided the backdrop to such mythical or legendary stories, but have also depicted perennially humankind’s involvement in nature and, more widely, our connection to the universe. This dialectical relationship between humans and nature has always been at the centre of Chinese thought, as remarked upon by R. Stewart Johnston: ‘Historically, Chinese garden design was underwritten by complete philosophies of scholarly thought and was an integral part of the whole physical environment.’<sup>25</sup>

Perceptions of the Chinese garden have changed continually over the course of three thousand years, starting in the Zhou period (1122–221 BC) with the hunting grounds of the aristocracy. The specific relationship between gardens and the arts in Chinese culture has an equally long and enduring history, with the connection between painting and gardens being particularly strong. As Johnston notes, ‘[e]vidence of early private gardens is to be found in ancient fresco paintings, clay stamps and stone engravings [...]’.<sup>26</sup> Not only were gardens represented in visual forms, but the opposite was also true as garden designs came to reflect

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<sup>24</sup> This image comes from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=hangzhou+botanic+garden&title=special:mediasearch&gotype=image> [accessed 1 June].

<sup>25</sup> R. Stewart Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China: A Study and Analysis of the Spatial Design of the Chinese Private Garden* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China*, p. 7.

art: gardens became a ‘visually composed scene, faithful to formal canons of painting composition’, according to Craig Clunas.<sup>27</sup> Chinese gardens reached the peaks of exquisite design and popularity and survived the troughs of war when the ideology at the foundation of their construction was attacked.<sup>28</sup> In summarising these movements, Lou Qingxi states that ‘[t]he classic Chinese garden first appeared in the Qin and Han Dynasties, was founded in the Wei-Jin and South-North Dynasties, developed in the Tang Dynasty, matured in the Song Dynasty and reached its peak in the Ming and Qing Dynasties’.<sup>29</sup> Art, especially landscape painting and poetry, and culture flourished during the political stability of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), leading to the increased popularity of private gardens.<sup>30</sup> As part of this growth, poems depicting natural scenery began to dominate and traditional Chinese scenic painting developed into an independent school of painting, led by literati painters, by the middle of the Tang Dynasty. Some gardens also had a study or an artist’s studio as an adjunct to the courtyard, with the studio’s windows framing or ‘borrowing’ the outside view, thus increasing the sense of space and consolidating the connection between landscape and art.<sup>31</sup> The gardens that the literati designed and built were intended as the expression of their ‘poetic feelings and pictorial thoughts’, often using natural features to represent how they thought of themselves.<sup>32</sup> For example, rocky peaks were incorporated to suggest that the owners dwelt in the mountains, away from human society, as though they were refined scholars and recluses. Typically, the metaphorical significance of such features was reinforced by the titles of paintings or in couplets and verses inscribed on the works. The trend for poetry and painting depicting landscapes, in particular hills and rivulets,<sup>33</sup> exerted an important influence on the planning and construction of gardens of that period, contributing further to the flourishing of the art of gardening in China. Indeed, at its height,

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<sup>27</sup> Craig Clunas, ‘Nature and Ideology in Western Descriptions of the Chinese Garden’, *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, 2000, 22, 153-166 (p. 153).

<sup>28</sup> One imperial garden that was destroyed after being looted and razed twice during the period of the Republic of China (1911-1949) was the 350-hectare Garden of Perfect Splendour (located in the northern part of Haidian District in Beijing). Extolled as the ‘Garden of Gardens’ and the ‘Versailles of the East’ during its heyday, it was considered by Victor Hugo, who called it ‘that enormous and magnificent museum in the East’, to outshine Notre Dame in Paris. It became subsequently a stone quarry, a fate that is inversely reflected in *Bô, le jardin imaginaire*, a former quarry that found its second life as a cultural and artistic site. For more information about the Garden of Perfect Splendour, see Lou Qingxi, *Chinese Gardens*, trans. by Zhang Lei and Yu Hong (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003), pp. 89-95 and p. 147 and <<https://sites.google.com/site/airwp8est/home-1/yuanmingyuan-park---an-eternal-monument>> [accessed 19 May 2022].

<sup>29</sup> Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> Traditional gardens in China are usually categorized into three types: (small) private gardens, also known as scholars’ or officials’ gardens, typically found in the area of Jiangnan (in cities such as Suzhou and Hangzhou); (large) imperial gardens, located in Beijing and Chengde for example; and the gardens found in temples, ancestral halls and natural scenic parks.

<sup>31</sup> The *Pursuing Harmony Garden* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota, reconstructs a Qing Dynasty garden with an attached studio that was dismantled and rebuilt inside the museum. See Carol Brash, ‘Classical Chinese Gardens in Twenty-first Century America: Cultivating the Past’, *ASIA Network Exchange*, Fall 2011, 19.1, 20–22.

<sup>32</sup> Liu Dun-zhen, *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, trans. by Chen Lixian (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993), p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Liu Dun-zhen, *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, p. 7.

landscape design was on the same plane as the greatly admired arts of calligraphy, poetry and painting.

Moreover, the look and structure of gardens relied heavily on the artistic attainment of garden owners which was why several renowned garden painters, such as Ji Cheng who wrote the book *Yuan Ye* (《园冶》), *Craft of Gardens*, on garden construction,<sup>34</sup> became famous later as garden designers. Likewise, celebrated gardening masters were almost all good at painting. Gardens deployed various visual tropes to create views and focal points, just as objects would appear in the foreground and background of a painting. Movement through the space of a garden equated to the shifting of the eye as it crossed the canvas. Also, the separate parts of the garden were discovered and enjoyed in a similar way to the unrolling of a Chinese landscape painting, each scene being revealed in turn and connected to the next. Gardens, as representations of ‘worlds-in-miniature’, according to Judy Bullington, ‘reflect the expressive forms and freehand brushwork of landscape paintings and, like scroll imagery, reveal themselves sequentially’.<sup>35</sup> The relationships between particular features of a garden would also replicate elements in a composition, placed carefully to produce a precise effect. In other words, constructing a garden required a similar aesthetic sensibility and spiritual quest to painting. While gardening and painting certainly influenced and complemented each other, the culture of the literati also blended nature with other art forms, including poetry, prose, calligraphy, music, culinary arts, clothing and jewellery.<sup>36</sup> Beyond a common aesthetics, gardens and the visual and verbal arts possessed several other commonalities, such as processes of meaning making (symbolism, for example) and philosophies of analysis and interpretation (Taoism and Confucianism, namely). Gardens thus satisfied both personal and philosophical ideas and ideals, representing in physical form the concepts of Chinese pictorial and poetic arts and translating these into reality by means of intricate craftsmanship. As Johnston observes, they shared ‘the same appeal to the imagination, the same concern with

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<sup>34</sup> Liu Dun-zhen, *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Judy Bullington, ‘East-West Relational Imaginaries: Classical Chinese Gardens and Self Cultivation’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2021, 1–6, (p. 3).

<sup>36</sup> Beyond the literati and Tang Dynasty, gardens continued to inspire different art forms and vice versa. For instance, after the Song Dynasty and in particular during the Ming period (1368 to 1644), gardens were represented in painting albums that showed different views of the gardens, described as ‘sections of scenery’, *fen sheng*, on individual pages. This tradition of painting gardens stems from the well-known work of the painter and poet Wang Wei (701–762), *Wangchuan tu*. These albums followed the style and purpose of functional paintings, with the separate illustrations showing the different angles of the garden, and they served as a precursor to the practice of making sketches or drawings when planning out a garden. Within the category of landscape painting, garden paintings were the most popular theme by far during those periods, mainly because these images contained philosophical and cultural messages, often reflecting the correspondence between the ethical principles of Confucianism and the interpretation of the landscape that borrowed also from Taoism and Buddhism. For more information about the concept of *fen sheng*, see Joanna Handlin Smith, ‘Gardens in Ch’i Piao-chia’s Social World: Wealth and Values in Late-Ming Kiangnan’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1992, 51.1, 55–81 (p. 71).

the aesthetics of movement, the same concepts of time and space, the same care and craftsmanship'.<sup>37</sup> He concludes this thought with the lyrical statement that within the 'enclosing walls [of a garden] is a living organic canvas, a moving poem, bridging the gap between the built environment and boundless nature'.<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand, gardens offered pleasant venues for social and political interaction and activities. They were places where scholars gathered to discuss, enjoy and practice their art, reinforcing the perception that Chinese gardens were synonymous with culture. Political, social and aesthetic ideas could be shared in an intimate and secure environment, contributing to a sense of local consciousness or identity and occasionally giving rise to the creation of a political movement. On the other hand, the literati also valued gardens as spaces for quiet contemplation and withdrawal from daily routines, so that they became a retreat from the demands and frustrations of public life and government service. They were personal spaces that gave aesthetic expression to their personality or aspirations. That Xuefeng Chen conceives of her garden as a personal space as well as a public one is evident when she observes that it connects her past, present and future. It allows her to return to the source of her origins to ask essential questions about life, in general, and about birth, death, joy and pain, in particular, and also to convey them to others.<sup>39</sup> The garden puts her into a direct relationship with the earth and the cosmos, thus helping her to understand the meaning of life and 'l'intemporalité' of her creative space.<sup>40</sup> What we find expressed in her garden is her interest not only in materials, colour and form, but also in how these elements convey her emotions and thoughts. Having been trained in both traditional Chinese techniques and western artistic approaches, she has studied different types of composition, integrated a range of techniques and interpreted divergent conceptual languages. But the most important learning for her is the ability to liberate herself from these techniques, compositions and languages in order to create a world that resembles her.<sup>41</sup> This personal, practical endeavour reinforces the observation made by Wendy Wen Li et al when they state that:

gardens are not mute. Like other spaces created by people, gardens say something about the people who construct and use them. Through daily life, people occupy such spaces as embodied beings whose social practices give meaning to the places

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<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China*, p. 73.

<sup>38</sup> Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China*, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

and situations they inhabit. The places people move through, dwell in and come to call their own crystallize aspects of who they are and want to be.<sup>42</sup>

As a contemporary artist who, by her own admission, is strongly influenced by the ancient culture of Yunnan province and its shamanism,<sup>43</sup> Xuefeng Chen creates a populist and pop art garden that owes its origins to the traditional gardens of the literati-elite, but that also moves beyond them to become a garden for herself and for the people. Even the choice of the materials she works with and the techniques she uses, not only in the garden sculptures but in other pieces too, reveal her commitment to the folk culture of her native province. She moulds resin and plastic figures for *Bô* (2018-), *Anaana* (2010) and *Dévorée* (2008); mixes textile, embroidery and sewing in *Cerceil blanc* (2007), *28 jours* (2013), *Poupée volante* (2010), *Cellules* (2009) and *Poupée chinoise 3* (2008); combines fabric and resin in *Grand-mère* (2006); textile and embroidery in *Love* (2011), *Accouchement* (2006), *Wuyu* (2013), *La douche* (2006), *Robot dévoré* (2013) and *Deux lunes* (2013); shapes ceramics in *Mémoire de feu* (2005), *L'amoureuse* (2006) and *Rêve* (2009); and produces paper cuttings in *Écho* (2011). Experimenting with different media within and across pieces, she creates truly transmedial works. While their simplicity is reminiscent of Art Brut and the hand-made crafts from South-East Asia, as Guillaume Thouroude remarks,<sup>44</sup> the influence of traditional Chinese art in the sculptures may be detected in the way that Chen, like the literati, favours expressivity over mimetic representation.

We find the crystallization of her sense of identity in her imaginary garden. As the site of the convergence of classic Chinese art, folk art and contemporary art, it is ‘un tissage/métissage riche et fort’ that Chen experiences as an everyday reality.<sup>45</sup> By choosing the garden as her medium, she perpetuates the traditional Chinese view of the close relationship between the garden and its owner-creator. She takes the position of the one ‘who is able to observe qualitatively’, the only one to possess the *mùlì* (目力), the power of the eye.<sup>46</sup> According to Maurizio Paolillo, this term, widely used in the 1600s, was found much

<sup>42</sup> Wendy Wen Li, Darrin Hodgetts and Elsie Ho, ‘Gardens, Transitions and Identity Reconstruction among Older Chinese Immigrants to New Zealand’, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 15.5, 786–96 (p. 787).

<sup>43</sup> Xuefeng Chen’s mother was a shaman and healer whose sacrificial ceremonies and meals were photographed and presented by Chen in a thesis (unpublished) at the École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg.

<sup>44</sup> Guillaume Thouroude, ‘La création franco-chinoise dans sa matérialité. Le symbolisme dans l’œuvre plastique de Xuefeng Chen et son rapport à la matière’, *Convergences franco-chinoises : la valeur de la créativité transculturelle*, ed. by Rosalind Silvester and Guillaume Thouroude, special issue of *Modern Languages Open*, forthcoming. The same reference to Chen’s artistic influences appears in *L’amoureuse: le monde symbolique de Xuefeng Chen*, p. 8 (unpublished text accompanying the artist’s exhibition, ‘L’amoureuse’, at the Galerie Française Besson, Lyon, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Wen Zhenheng quoted in Maurizio Paolillo, ‘Forging the garden: The “Yuanye” and the Significance of the Chinese Garden in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century’, *East and West*, December 2003, 53.1/4, 209–39 (p. 210).

earlier in *fēngshuǐ* (風水) texts and refers to the indispensable ability to see and comprehend the qualitative features of landscapes imbued with the energy known as *qì* (氣).<sup>47</sup> Paolillo explains that in the *Book of Sepultures*, thought to be a 9<sup>th</sup>-century geomantic work, *mùli* denotes the necessary condition for a subject or object to be in complete harmony with the layout of the natural landscape, a type of knowledge resulting from the principles governing the interpretation of the landscape itself.<sup>48</sup> Into the mid-sixteenth century, an even closer relationship between the garden and its owner was apparent, especially in the growing expectation that the garden reflected the heart of the owner. Rather than putting the emphasis on the object of the painting, this shift highlighted the act of painting and the intimate connection between people and nature, with humans situated within the natural world rather than outside it. It was expected that any worthy artists should identify themselves completely with their subject, allowing their spirit to be in harmony with, for example, the mood of the mountain and the mountain with them, so that human feelings were, in effect, projected onto the physical forms of nature. As Maggie Keswick explains:

Nature becomes man's psychological state writ large and in vegetable form, and the whole weight of creative responsibility begins to shift from technique, or even natural ability, to the artist's character and mood. [...] Nature enters into a two-way relationship with man's deepest feelings; the outer world changes according to his emotions, and his emotions follow the moods of nature like a barometer.<sup>49</sup>

In this way, the subject of a painting was not so much the corporeal object being observed, but the mind of the painter, his/her own *qì* finding expression in the world in which s/he was situated. Similarly, we contend that Xuefeng Chen puts her whole soul into her imaginary garden so that it expresses the essence of her life and her mind in the form of 'all-inclusive creative art'.<sup>50</sup> Given the unequivocal input of the artist's self into *Bô*, we can, then, recognise the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of its parts and conception.

### *Elements of classic Chinese gardens in 'Bô – le jardin imaginaire'*

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<sup>47</sup> Paolillo, 'Forging the garden', 2.

<sup>48</sup> Paolillo, 'Forging the garden', 2.

<sup>49</sup> Maggie Keswick, *The Chinese Garden: History, Art and Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, [1978] 1986), pp. 104–05.

<sup>50</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 115.

In the design of Chinese gardens, there was more freedom for expressions of the imagination and creativity, compared to the more regulated features and functions of the house. Keswick explains how ‘the Chinese house mirrored the Confucian desire to regulate human society, [while] the Chinese garden followed the Taoist principle of harmony with nature’.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, gardens were associated with wild rather than cultivated nature and became an art form that imitated natural scenery, including the irregular and free patterns of the arrangements of paths, hillocks, pools, plants and buildings. This contrasted with the geometrical plots that were popular in Europe especially up until the second half of the eighteenth century. Such an alternative style of gardening was recognised as one of the attractive features of the fashion for *chinoiserie*, a term which came into use after the sumptuous Chinese-style festival held at Louis XIV’s court on the last day of December 1699 and which heralded the trend for Chinese ceramics, wallpaper, embroidery, garments, furniture and architecture that spread across Europe in the new century. The fascination with *chinoiserie* diminished in the late nineteenth century as a result of the corruption of the Qing dynasty and it was not until China’s ‘Reform and Opening Up’ policy from 1978 that Chinese gardens captured international attention again. It would be untrue to claim that Xuefeng Chen is trying to reinvigorate the French public’s taste for Chinese décor in a twenty-first century version of the trend or that her garden celebrates its Chinese creator in visible ways. Unlike classic Chinese gardens, Chen’s does not contain shrubs or plants and the only flower is inorganic, made out of resin. Water, a very important and highly symbolic element (see below), is absent. Windows, lawn or grass, pavilions and bridges are also lacking. Furthermore, Chen’s garden does not engage all the senses: while seeing sculptures and touching them are privileged and feeling breezes would occur naturally in the open-air avenue, hearing (flowing water and the wind in the trees, for instance) and smelling (blossoms or flowers) are not possible.<sup>52</sup> The dominating features that we do find – sculptures and large, open spaces – were not typically favoured in classic Chinese gardens. Nevertheless, if we go beyond these initial impressions, we are able to detect some essential elements of classic Chinese gardens.

### *Rocks*

The immensely important role of rocks and water in classic Chinese gardens stems from the symbolism Confucius attributed to them in his aphorism: ‘The wise find pleasure in water;

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<sup>51</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the activation of senses in classic Chinese gardens, see Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 141.

the virtuous find pleasure in mountains.’<sup>53</sup> Garden owners, in the pursuit of virtue and wisdom, ensured that these two elements were at the foundation of their garden design: they comprised the soul of the garden, its infinite fluidity and its steadfast solidity. Notably, too, the Chinese word for landscape, *shān shuǐ* (山水), means literally ‘mountains and water’.

Keswick remarks that this combination evokes ‘the fundamental opposition of *yang* and *yin*, of masculine strength and feminine moisture, and the aesthetically satisfying juxtaposition of rough with smooth, of still rock with flowing stream’.<sup>54</sup> Rocks are used without the counterpoint of water in Xuefeng Chen’s garden and therefore dominate it, reminding us of the deep and long-lasting appreciation of this natural material by the Chinese, referred to by Keswick as ‘rock-worship’ because of the ancient belief that mountains and boulders were imbued with supernatural power and were therefore revered as local gods.<sup>55</sup> The intensity of this relationship between human beings and rocks is captured well in the image of Chen standing above her creation in the midst of her mineral environment (see Figure 7), appearing as ‘an inseparable part of the great Universe’ in which she exists and conveying a sense of the fundamental unity of all things.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 7. Xuefeng Chen above ‘Baleine bleu’ and ‘L’esprit d’arbre’. © Jean-Luc Petit.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Confucius, *Confucian Analects*, trans. by James Legge (New York: Dover, [1861] 1971), Book 6, Chapter 21, p. 192.

<sup>54</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 156.

<sup>55</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 155.

<sup>56</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> The image appears in Xuefeng Chen, *Bô – le jardin imaginaire* (unpublished), 2018, 1–7 (p. 4). The artist gave this text describing her installation to the author of this article in advance of her participation in the author’s conference, ‘Chinese Traits, Francophone Lines: The Value of Transcultural Creativity’, Queen’s University Belfast, 21–22 November 2019. The text may be accessed via the following website: <<https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/ael/Discover/Conferences/ChineseTraitsFrancophoneLinesConference2019/InformationforParticipants/>> [accessed 19 May 2022].



The edges of the quarry form a natural stone ridge around the installation, akin to a flat mountain range, with hewn ledges at various heights that resemble the steep precipices or overhanging cliffs of a mountain. The sculptures and pathways constructed on the floor of the ‘terre calcaire’ act as a foil to the verticality of the site, adding layers and depth.<sup>58</sup> The solidity of the surrounding rock gives the impression of substance in contrast to the more insubstantial and sparsely arranged object-sculptures on the ground. Its sides appear to have a similar function to the wall that would have traditionally enclosed a Chinese garden and would have blocked out human activity and the demands on the inhabitants/proprietors, ensuring one of the functions of the garden as a space for nature, contemplation and rest. The dominance of the overhead, circling rock formation makes apparent the constructedness of the site and therefore the fact that, as Keswick puts it, ‘a Chinese garden is *built*’, whereas in the West a garden is planted.<sup>59</sup> The classic Chinese garden aspired to blend nature and construction, going beyond the imitation of nature to demonstrate its beauty in a delimited space. Indeed, Lou states that the garden:

is also an improvement on nature which should show the painstaking efforts of the garden builder in every corner. The Chinese garden has concentrated man-made structures like rockery, fish ponds and all manner of pavilions together with flowers, trees, breezes and moonlight of nature, and have combined all these into an artistic entity in which man and nature can co-exist harmoniously.<sup>60</sup>

In Chen’s garden, the absence of plants and trees, architecture and water features means that ‘beauty’ must derive from the natural simplicity and imposing quality of the quarry rock and from the intriguing, imagined creatures of the (wo)man-made sculptures. The rock formation is not crafted by stonemasons or chiselled into irregular, interesting shapes, but is the result of quarry work carried out by machines. The effect, then, is not properly wild as Taoist taste would dictate, but its uniformity offers another aesthetic function since it crowns the arena in which the sculptures are staged and creates a harmonious balance between the two spaces, one reaching upwards towards the heavens and the other on ground level with humankind. Although *Bô* does not look like a typical Chinese garden, it conveys the same aim in its conceptualization: the site as a whole comes across as an ‘artistic entity’ that brings together people and nature.

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<sup>58</sup> Chen, *Bô – le jardin imaginaire*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 5.

Large standing rocks would have been used in classic Chinese gardens to symbolise mountains, considered to be the natural connection between heaven and earth, as well as representing eternity (see Figure 6). These rocks stood for *dào* (道), ‘way’, the natural law and conduct to be followed to enable the harmonious functioning of the world. Much like the manner in which the quarry stone has been dug away, Keswick suggests that standing stones in a Chinese garden are ‘part of the web of existence and subject to the inevitable processes of time and decay’.<sup>61</sup> Traditionally, the rocks used for building hillocks or rockeries would have been irregularly shaped and containing cavities so that it was possible to see through parts of them, connoting insight and wisdom.<sup>62</sup> In *Bô*, the structure of the differently shaped sculptures acts like the rocks of a traditional Chinese garden, allowing viewers to see around, behind and sometimes through them. The harmony between the pale, usually white, colour of plastered walls within and around Chinese gardens and the use of rich colours when planting, along with the play of light, shadow and shapes, replicates, in the art of garden creation, a number of painterly techniques. Chen maintains these contrasts and this artistry when setting the brightly coloured sculptures against the prevailing browns and greys of the quarry stone. The visitors themselves also cast shadows alongside those of the sculptures, unknowingly imitating contrast and foil effects.<sup>63</sup> Such paired opposites of light against dark replicate the essential duality of *yīn* (阴) and *yáng* (阳), the negative and positive principles of Taoist thinking that are both required to ensure a healthy and harmonious balance in the world. The eternal oscillation between the two plays out over the course of a day as the sunlight shifts from one side of the quarry to the other, ‘making manifest, and sensual, the fundamental principles of the universe’.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Observation spots, routes and wandering*

Lou, in *Chinese Gardens*, explains that ‘[t]he layout of the architecture has to both “make scenery” and to “get scenery”’, by which he means that architecture should be positioned within the garden so that it comprises an attractive view in itself and, at the same time, offers a site from which to enjoy a scene or multiple scenes of the garden.<sup>65</sup> In Chen’s garden, sculptures are the closest she comes to providing architecture, until, at least, the planned conference room at the site is built. Dotted around the ground of the quarry in asymmetric

<sup>61</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup> Liu Dun-zhen, *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the contrast and foil effect, see Liu Dun-zhen, *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>64</sup> Keswick, *The Chinese Garden*, p. 134.

<sup>65</sup> Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 57.

positions, they invite the visitor to go up to them, stroll around them, and in some cases even to climb on them. From one sculpture, others can be seen, reached by winding paths, thus affording the making of scenery. The changing views of the elements within traditional Chinese gardens were revealed as people strolled up and down the paths, and this is similar to the way in which sculptures become gradually visible in Chen's garden: both play on the lack of homogeneity of perspective. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the two-dimensional paths and three-dimensional sculptures and rocks are reminiscent of the mixed-level perspectives evident in classic Chinese gardens. The traditional prerogative for gardens to be 'seeable, tour-able and livable',<sup>66</sup> is ensured in *Bô* by means of the provision of scenic spots and areas connected by pathways. *Bô*, like traditional Chinese gardens, has no lawns and the ground is left quite rough, although the natural rock is made uniform enough to walk upon.<sup>67</sup> These routes connecting points of interest facilitate what Lou calls 'watching in motion'; in other words, the visitors view the best sites as they move around the garden.<sup>68</sup> They are also able to stop and 'observe fixedly' from the vantage point of chairs in front of the site enclosing the sculptures, offering a wider field of vision and places for leisurely contemplation (see Figure 8).<sup>69</sup>



Figure 8. Opening day at La Karrière, August 2017. © Michel Joly<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 58.

<sup>67</sup> Keswick notes that, in traditional Chinese gardens, 'the ground is either paved, often with fancy designs or, in more open or uneven places, left quite rocky' (*The Chinese Garden*, p. 18).

<sup>68</sup> Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 138.

<sup>69</sup> This term is also borrowed from Lou, *Chinese Gardens*, p. 138.

<sup>70</sup> The image is taken from <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

The literati showed that different ways of experiencing and representing the landscape were possible, including the important concept of *yóu*, often translated as ‘wandering’ or ‘travelling’. As well as providing a place to dwell, the literati’s garden offered a space to wander, both physically and mentally. The Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (b.369 – d.286 BC) described *yóu* as transcendental freedom, achieved after becoming one with the universe and entailing the forgetting of the self. For him, physical movement was not an essential aspect of *yóu* since it reflected more a state of being. Zhuangzi’s conception of *yóu* was particularly influential on later artistic developments, as it was deemed to be a necessary condition for creating and appreciating landscape arts, especially. The correlations between viewing paintings and garden-making were reinforced further in the literature on garden design which applied the same techniques and ideas in Chinese painting theory to the interpretation of gardening practices. Liang Jie and Zheng Xin consider two such works, *The Craft of Gardens* (1631) and *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (c. 1810), and examine how they present the position of the mind when looking at gardens.<sup>71</sup> They find that *The Craft of Gardens* advocates the creation of a physical space for mind-wandering so that the mind is free to observe vicariously the scenery as it would observe a painting, making explicit the relationship between the two by using the term *rú huà* (如画), ‘like a painting / picturesque’. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* conceives of mind-wandering as a ‘recreational endeavor’, treating painting principles as just one element of garden-making that causes the mind to be transported.<sup>72</sup> Significantly, Jie and Xin note that both works equate the way that the mind enters a painting to the way that it enters a garden scene. Extending this principle, we suggest that the aesthetic experience of observing Xuefeng Chen’s garden involves the spirit of *yóu* because it requires the visitors to use their imagination to go beyond the limits of reality and their expectations of a garden in Burgundy to accept its unusual and wondrous creatures. Entering the garden as they would enter a painting, they are encouraged to wander corporeally around the space as well as wander in their minds. For the literati, according to Christina Han, this would have meant replicating ‘an ideal mode of existence’ and exercising

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<sup>71</sup> Liang Jie and Zheng Xin, ‘Influences of Literati painting on garden-making: a comparative study of *Yuan ye* (*The Craft of Gardens*) and *Fu sheng lui ji* (*Six Chapters of a Floating Life*)’, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 2017, 37.4, 336–341.

<sup>72</sup> Jie and Xin, ‘Influences of Literati painting’, 336.

‘boundless creativity’.<sup>73</sup> By sharing this understanding and practice of *yóu*, Chen’s visitors, like the literati, are able to use the garden as a common physical and mental space.

While spiritual wandering does not necessitate actual movement, another meaning of *yóu*, ‘to swim’, has mobility at its core. The word also comprises the notion of play or playfulness, often implying that a person is not only in harmony with the world around him or her, but is also enjoying it playfully. Indeed, if we go back to Confucius (551-479 BC), we find that he employed *yóu* with reference to the arts, thus literally advocating one’s playful swimming or wandering in the arts.<sup>74</sup> Since play may involve being played, there is always a double aspect to play and this is equally true when applied to the dynamics of experiencing a Chinese garden. The literati emphasized the oppositional components of their gardens, contrasting hidden and visible elements, open and closed surfaces, high and low materials and planting, for instance, and the possibility of seeing or of being seen was a related aesthetic. Taking a certain path in a classic Chinese garden revealed a distinct vista, sometimes expected and sometimes surprising, as though the garden was playing with the visitor’s sight line: s/he could have chosen to go left or right in order to see, be seen or to be hidden; s/he could have experienced the site’s geography while strolling around because there was no predetermined departure point or terminus. Similarly, when we look at the sculptures in Chen’s garden, we become part of the scenery so that others have the opportunity to see us just as much as we seek out the artworks. Reciprocity and multiplicity of perspective are afforded by *yóu* when applied to both the classic Chinese garden and to Chen’s imaginary space. Significantly, Chen encourages mental and physical interaction and playing with her sculptures so that the visitors’ thoughts are focussed on them and away from other preoccupations, in much the same way that scenic landscapes in China have been shown to reduce stress.<sup>75</sup> An image on La Karrière website shows the artist poised on one leg, mimicking a dancer, with an arm reaching up to paint the finishing touches onto the lips of one of her limbless creatures (Figure 9). The careful staging of such a pose depicts a light-hearted wryness about the actions that reinforce her bodily and spiritual investment in the sculptures. She intends that people wander freely around and amongst the sculptures, whether it be children peering through giant resin legs and touching patterned surfaces or adults travelling in their minds while standing with arms folded or hands in pockets contemplating

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<sup>73</sup> Christina Han, ‘The Aesthetics of Wandering in the Chinese Literati Garden’, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, 2012, 32.4, 297–301 (p. 299).

<sup>74</sup> Confucius, *Lun yu (The Analects)*, 7.6. Cited in Han, ‘The Aesthetics of Wandering’, 299.

<sup>75</sup> Bo Yang and Nancy J. Volkman, ‘From Traditional to Contemporary: Revelations in Chinese Garden and Public Space Design’, *Urban Design International*, 2010, 15.4, 208–220 (p. 218).

fixedly a collection of pink blobs (Figure 10). Xuefeng Chen is a firm believer that her work should be experienced and enjoyed by this generation and the next: it has a transgenerational function that confirms its status as an historical artefact as well as being a cultural and geo-social artefact. She emphasizes, too, the importance of education (or self-cultivation, if traditional Chinese terminology is borrowed) about nature through art from an early age:

Je ressens profondément l'importance de l'éducation au cours de la petite enfance. J'espère que chaque individu pourra prêter attention à l'environnement et à l'espace dans lequel nous vivons, retrouver l'harmonie entre les hommes et avec la nature. Au cœur de ce projet BÔ – Le Jardin Imaginaire, je souhaite développer un espace artistique pour vivre, partager et transmettre mes créations.<sup>76</sup>

For her, learning to create entails learning to live and to respect nature, whether it appears in the form of a tiny seed, or in the guise of human beings, or on the immense scale of the whole universe. Indeed, the creation of *Bô* coincided with two significant life events, the birth of her daughter and that of her 'double culture'.<sup>77</sup> To reinforce further the idea of the transmission of her values and her work across generations, she dedicates the garden to her three children and to her mother.<sup>78</sup>



<sup>76</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo-transmission/>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>77</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo/>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>78</sup> Chen, <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/pourquoi-bo/>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

Figure 9. Xuefeng Chen painting ‘L’esprit d’arbre’. © Michel Joly.<sup>79</sup>



Figure 10. Children and adults interacting with (from left to right of the image) ‘Yeux de mer’, ‘L’Esprit d’arbre’ and ‘Annana’. © Xuefeng Chen.<sup>80</sup>

Fittingly, the concept of *yóu* has the additional sense of human interaction, conveying the meanings of ‘to associate with’ and ‘to visit’. The garden, especially the literati garden as we have noted, was sometimes a space to meet others – friends, relatives, other like-minded scholars and officials – as well as being a place to which the individual could withdraw from the responsibilities of work. Just like those gardens, much of the pleasure of Chen’s one is derived from the establishment of relationships, such as those between the visitors who are strangers to each other but who view the work in the same spatiotemporal setting, cross each other’s paths and contribute to the overall spectacle. What is more, we see in the images of Xuefeng Chen working on *Bô* (for example, Figure 11) that she has help from a few other craftsmen to create the sculptures. Also, presumably, the paths were carved out by the groundsmen or site workers who also moved the sculptures into place. Constructing a garden,

<sup>79</sup> The image appears on <<http://lakarriere.fr>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>80</sup> The image comes from <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/realisation>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

whether for the literati or for Chen, is not an individual endeavour but it requires human interaction, *yóu*.<sup>81</sup>

Another interpretation of *yóu*, still involving interaction, relates to the semantic field of communication, translated as ‘to express one’s idea’ and ‘to investigate and learn’. Following in the footsteps of the literati who possessed gardens that reflected their character and ideals, Chen’s *jardin imaginaire* could be read in the same way, as an expression of her (fun) view of the world, her connection to it and her (playful) ideas as an artist, while, simultaneously, offering the stimulus for the viewer to generate opinions about what s/he sees and to derive some understanding of Chen’s aesthetics, personality and values. The garden also allows visitors to wander in a space from the past, the quarry having been abandoned since 2003 and bought by the *commune* to be re-purposed as an art venue. Indeed, it represents a valuable connection between past and present through people and their mediating interaction, as well as creating a link between the visitors and the local population whose livelihoods once depended on the quarry. Conversely, its future now depends on their continued support. Art as daily life and daily life as art seems to be a principle close to Chen’s heart.

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<sup>81</sup> R. Stewart Johnston identifies five people who were instrumental in the designing of classic Chinese gardens: the scholar, the architect-gardener, the master craftsman, the plantsman and the geomancer. See *Scholar Gardens of China*, p. 38.





Figure 11. © Xuefeng Chen at Atelier Pélud.<sup>82</sup>

### *People and nature*

[T]he idea of the garden [...] continues to be a powerful influence in the minds of the Chinese people, and new gardens and parks take up the ancient traditions of man and nature, seeking as always a perfect balance between the two.<sup>83</sup>

Perceived from both eastern and western perspectives, gardens are still thought of as ‘cultural enterprises associated with improving the endowments of human character and the environment’.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, we became aware of this relationship by tracing the multiple meanings of *yóu* as individuals encounter nature: we moved from contemplating the subjective experience of Xuefeng Chen’s garden aesthetics, associated with both spiritual freedom and play, to a more expansive, communal understanding of the term as denoting interaction. Both of these contexts, personal and social, rely on the harmonious alignment between people and nature, meaning that her imaginary garden has a similar function to that of the classic Chinese garden, enabling the exploration and increased understanding of others

<sup>82</sup> The image comes from <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/realisation>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>83</sup> Johnston, *Scholar Gardens of China*, p. 315.

<sup>84</sup> Bullington, ‘East-West Relational Imaginaries’, 1.

through the natural environment. The type of humanism that is nourished here bears the fruit of self-cultivation (learning about Chen's artworks, her techniques and materials) and social cultivation (learning to negotiate the space with others and understanding the diverse cultural influences on the artist), though the achievement of the former is not a sign of privilege in this contemporary setting. 'Traditionally,' Bullington writes, 'the value of classical Chinese gardens as a tool for self-cultivation was reserved for patrons and a select circle of individuals like scholars whose purview was moral education'.<sup>85</sup> There was the odd exception, such as Li Yu, a garden designer and writer in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century who advocated the concepts of novelty and frugality. Born in 1611, Li Yu constructed 'The Mustard Seed Garden' in 1668 which was conceived as a space for literary creation. In one of his books in which he describes his philosophy of garden design, he proposes that novelty is the most important principle of a garden with frugality, which he contrasts to lavishness and elegance, at its centre.<sup>86</sup> As a commoner himself who tried and failed to elevate his social standing, he challenged the prevailing idea that gardens were the cultural products of the gentry class only and he believed that ordinary people could create remarkable gardens within their modest means. By including the average person in the discourse about gardens and in the relationship between creativity and nature, he reconciled 'elitist aesthetics with the culture of the commoner'.<sup>87</sup> Xuefeng Chen, too, determines that the garden should be enjoyed and experienced by all, whatever their socioeconomic background, age, or level of education. Centuries later, she repeats this socio-cultural shift in which gardens are no longer constructed for the pleasure of the elite but are open to the public. Every visitor, then, has the opportunity to engage with a potentially transformative experience by extending their knowledge of contemporary art, witnessing Chen's cultural journey as expressed in her creations, and encountering people of different nationalities and ages. Chen, evidently, favours an inclusive approach to self- and social education.

Furthermore, the garden is a tangible form of cultural heritage that, in Chen's conceptualization, enables cross-cultural communication. There is an established tradition of Chinese-style gardens built in, or de-constructed and transported to, other countries as a means of cross-cultural exchange, or symbol of friendship, or cultural asset for a local immigrant community, as investigated by, amongst others, Zhai Lian (regarding Europe),

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<sup>85</sup> Bullington, 'East-West Relational Imaginaries', 2.

<sup>86</sup> Jiayan Yun and Joonhyun Kim describe Li's concepts of novelty and frugality in 'Sociocultural Factors of the Late Ming and Early Qing Chinese Garden Landscape, based on Philosophies seen in *Yuanye*, *Zhangwuzhi*, and *Xianqingouji*', *Landscape Research*, 2019, 44.2, 174–85 (p. 181).

<sup>87</sup> Yun and Kim, 'Sociocultural Factors', 182.

Judy Bullington, Carol Brash (North America), Jundan Zhang and Eric Shelton (New Zealand) and Mechtild Rössler (Asia).<sup>88</sup> Chen's contribution to the garden as its artist-designer complements the financial investment and labour provided by the *commune* of Villars-Fontaine, making it a truly bi-cultural undertaking. This function of the garden as a cross-cultural endeavour for migrants has attracted some critical attention, especially in the field of psychology. An idea common to such studies is that garden-making and garden-maintaining allow people 'to create continuity in their identities and lives across countries'.<sup>89</sup> In other words, gardens facilitate successful migration and the building of a new life in a new environment, while not forgetting the cultural ties to origins. If gardens are communal, they provide a social outlet to share expertise and skills learnt in their homeland, offering a connection both to their past and to others, whether from the same cultural background or from the 'host' country.<sup>90</sup> Their ability to create a familiar cultural space may also engender a sense of belonging in a new place, again helping to forge a connection between the country of origin and the adoptive country.<sup>91</sup> By making decisions about what is grown and where, which tasks need to be done, and how to look after the plants, migrants have some control and ownership of the space.<sup>92</sup> The migrant's identity, already closely attached to a particular place, garners new, shared and personal meanings in another place, the locus of the garden. S/he is able, thus, to evolve and recreate her/himself across time and space.

Given the above-mentioned importance of place in the construction of an individual's identity, we suggest that, while Xuefeng Chen does not create a community garden,<sup>93</sup> she nevertheless uses her imaginary garden to forge and transmit a new sense of self and place in France. The garden affords, in this way, a strategy for self-construction and a means to say something about herself. It has become an important part of Chen's 'second' life, in effect transplanting her Chinese past and culture onto French soil. The traditionally-inspired elements of her garden meld with the site-specific realities to bring about both cultural and biographical continuity between her past and present. We should also bear in mind that the visitors who experience her garden come not only from the local region but also from other

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<sup>88</sup> Bullington and Brash are cited above. See also Jundan Zhang and Eric Shelton, 'Authentic Antipodean Chineseness? A Scholar's Garden in Aotearoa/New Zealand', *Journal of China Tourism Research*, 2012, 8.3, 248–267; and Mechtild Rössler, 'World Heritage Cultural Landscapes; A UNESCO Flagship Programme 1992–2006', *Landscape Research*, 2006, 31.4, 333–353.

<sup>89</sup> Li et al, 'Gardens, Transitions and Identity Reconstruction', 787.

<sup>90</sup> Li et al, 'Gardens, Transitions and Identity Reconstruction', 787.

<sup>91</sup> Li et al, 'Gardens, Transitions and Identity Reconstruction', 787.

<sup>92</sup> Li et al, 'Gardens, Transitions and Identity Reconstruction', 787.

<sup>93</sup> Xiaoying Ding, Yukan Zhang, Jie Zheng and Xiaopeng Yue cite the American Community Garden Association's definition of a community garden as 'any piece of land that is cultivated and managed by a group of people'. See 'Design and Social Factors Affecting the Formation of Social Capital in Chinese Community Garden', *Sustainability*, 2020, 12, 10644, §1.

parts of France, neighbouring countries (Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands, especially during the high tourist season) and further afield. Since the creation of the garden in 2018, there have been 98,365 visitors to La Karrière.<sup>94</sup> *Bô*, then, is cross-cultural from the perspective of its audience as well as its creator, bridging differences and ‘speaking’ to people who may not share a language. As a means for non-verbal communication across and beyond ethnicity, the garden also expands Chen’s social space. This major, agentive undertaking connects people, art and nature, and she hopes to improve both her own well-being and the quality of life of those who live near it, work in it, or visit it. She could, therefore, be called a ‘transversal enabler’, to borrow a term from Amanda Wise,<sup>95</sup> a personality who plays ‘an important role in producing sociality within interethnic networks’.<sup>96</sup>

Within the field of education too, some research has focused on gardens as intercultural contact zones that enable learning through ‘a community of conviviality’.<sup>97</sup> In these, emphasis is placed on acts of everyday multiculturalism, meaning the ways in which ‘people negotiate senses, sensibilities, emotionality, and relationality’ across cultures.<sup>98</sup> Recent studies have moved on from interrogating the value of cultural diversity, a development advocated by Stuart Hall,<sup>99</sup> to considering how it is experienced in everyday situations in which different groups interact with each other.<sup>100</sup> Through the mundane activity of tending to a garden, it is possible to see how the concepts of nation and community may become less abstract and boundaries between them more blurred. Even though the visitors to Xuefeng Chen’s garden do not get involved in the act of gardening itself, *Bô* is still a space where people are exposed in an immediate way to nature and to ‘the everyday lived reality of cultural differences’.<sup>101</sup> Bringing various people into contact with each other encourages a sense of spontaneous conviviality, albeit transient. Educational scientists would consider, in particular, such a multicultural space from the perspective of practice-based learning, usually focusing on human practices, although Shan and Walter (2014) also examine learning that is mediated through non-human entities, namely the use of land, waste and free-floating seeds

<sup>94</sup> This figure was provided in email correspondence between the author and Léna Augusto at La Karrière on 20 May 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Amanda Wise, ‘Everyday Multiculturalism: Transversal Crossing and Working Class Cosmopolitans’ in Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Valayutham (eds.), *Everyday Multiculturalism* (London: Palgrave, 2009), pp. 21–45.

<sup>96</sup> Hongxia Shan and Pierre Walter, ‘Growing Everyday Multiculturalism: Practice-Based Learning of Chinese Immigrants Through Community Gardens in Canada’, *Adult Education Quarterly*, 2015, 65.1, 19–34 (p. 27).

<sup>97</sup> This term is used by Shan and Walter, ‘Growing Everyday Multiculturalism’, 26.

<sup>98</sup> Shan and Walter, ‘Growing Everyday Multiculturalism’, 19.

<sup>99</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Conclusions: The multi-cultural question’ in Barnor Hesse (ed.), *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transcriptions* (London: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 209–241.

<sup>100</sup> See Ang, *On not speaking Chinese*, 2001. Also Watson and Saha ‘Suburban drifts’, 2012 and Wise, ‘Sensuous multiculturalism’, 2010 use the terms ‘mundane’ and ‘quotidian multiculturalism’.

<sup>101</sup> Shan and Walter, ‘Growing Everyday Multiculturalism’, 20.

in community gardens. Similarly, we propose that Chen's garden with its art installations – non-human entities – offers cross-cultural learning opportunities for both its creator and visitors, thus influencing a human living space. The confluence of the two prompts the visitors to reflect on how they belong to and learn from natural spaces and how they may be environmentally aware beings. Xuefeng Chen invites people into the natural world, encouraging them to wander around an eco-aesthetic landscape, rather than presenting a painted and mounted landscape or confining them to an art gallery or museum. Given this and the fact that, as Chen herself emphasizes, the major theme addressed by her garden is 'l'harmonie entre l'homme et la nature',<sup>102</sup> her ecocentric approach, here and elsewhere, is reinforced.<sup>103</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Xuefeng Chen creates an 'authentic' garden in the sense that it reflects her self, her experiences of having been formed and transformed by different cultures and artistic practices, rather than in the sense of reconstructing an authentic Chinese garden transposed to a European setting. She has combined the large, open spaces punctuated with unnatural sculptures typical of European parklands with the meandering paths and unexpected vistas of the more intimate Chinese garden. Having found '[s]on propre chemin',<sup>104</sup> she has created a contemporary, hybridized form of garden that is both attractive and functional as a space for the visiting public. Even though hybridity has become a common and sometimes misused term in everyday life, we would concur with Carol Brash when she asserts that '[h]ybridization is unavoidable when transferring a cultural icon, especially one so layered in meaning as the garden in China'.<sup>105</sup> Any elements remaining in *Bô* of the traditional Chinese garden are abstractions and remodellings that play with national frames of reference and resist being marginalized as a cultural item. As an adaptation, then, it needs to produce its own meanings since the majority of its visitors will not share the cultural memories underlying it that we have sought to reveal. That is to say, Chen's garden is an aesthetic space that attracts visitors from a range of countries, not only those from a certain ethnic group. It

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<sup>102</sup> Chen, *Bô – le jardin imaginaire*, 4.

<sup>103</sup> Xuefeng Chen wrote in correspondence with the author on 11 November 2021 that during the pandemic she created twelve sculptures in the Forest of Drome, South-eastern France, which are exhibited at the Arter Museum in Istanbul from 30 March to 19 December 2022. The sculptures are inspired by *Bô – le jardin imaginaire*, according to her website <<https://www.bojardinimaginaire.fr/realisation>> [accessed 1 June 2022].

<sup>104</sup> Chen, *Xuefeng Chen*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Brash, 'Classical Chinese Gardens', 17–18.

possesses a universality through its widely accessible visual signification and its distant Chinese genealogy. If meaning for visitors is not necessarily derived from their prior knowledge of the culture, it is gleaned in an experiential way, as they view and move around the site, using their senses so that the landscape becomes a continuum of the self and the garden space. Their cognitive and affective responses lead to new interpretative opportunities precisely by being exposed to this non-specific cultural context.

*Bô*, as we have seen in the course of this study, demonstrates the very singular and personal imprint and intentions of its creator. Although Chen's garden is not looked after by a community, it shares a similar promotion of social capital by regenerating a space for the public, encouraging participation in the community, stimulating, more widely, human and intergenerational interaction, increasing cross-cultural communication and by putting people into direct contact with the environment. Chen's garden is, therefore, a good example of place being negotiated socially since it is through embodied encounters with other people and objects (the installations) that the visitors gain knowledge. While it is the realisation of a personal vision and artistic project, its day-to-day functioning maintains a strong social focus: green infrastructure has here a positive correlation with social value. Its concern for cross-cultural exchange, the diversity of its purposes and the alterations to any traditional form indicate a complex identity integrating both personal and collective memories and histories. It folds in classic and popular Chinese traditions, Western and Chinese cultures and techniques, people and nature, as well as the past, present and future into a Deleuze-Guattarian 'agencement'.<sup>106</sup> By assembling the multiple influences and functions of these actors, the garden exhibits social complexity in terms of fluidity (of identity, expression, ideas) and exchangeability (of knowledge and experience), values that contribute to the social worth of the installation. With some layers of meaning lost in the adaptation from China to France and others added, Chen's garden acts as a temporal assemblage because it gives access to her Chinese past, represents her evolution into the present and suggests a direction for the future. An artwork, first and foremost, *Bô* is as well a negotiation of assemblages that make up different landscapes, whether formed by internal or external factors, and it is, ultimately, both this negotiation of the material production of culture and the relationship between people and the environment that the garden embodies.

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<sup>106</sup> 'Agencement', or 'assemblage' in English, is a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that was presented originally in their book, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Editions Minuit, 1980). We are using the concept in the same way, by thinking of social entities as wholes, not reducible to their parts, and whose properties emerge from the interactions between the parts.

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