



## Understanding TONG Jun and His Chinese Garden Study: A Report of Symposium on Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China

Kai Gu, Guangya Zhu

*School of Architecture, Southeast University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210096, China*

**Corresponding author:** Guangya Zhu, School of Architecture, Southeast University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210096, China. Email: zhgy@seu.edu.cn

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### ABSTRACT

TONG Jun was an architect and also a researcher on Chinese gardens. His *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* was written in English and a new version of Chinese translation was newly published. A symposium on this book was held and many scholars and architects expressed their understandings on Tong Jun and his Chinese garden study, showing its significance in both fields of scholarship and architectural practice today.

**Keywords:** TONG Jun, Chinese garden, architecture, translation

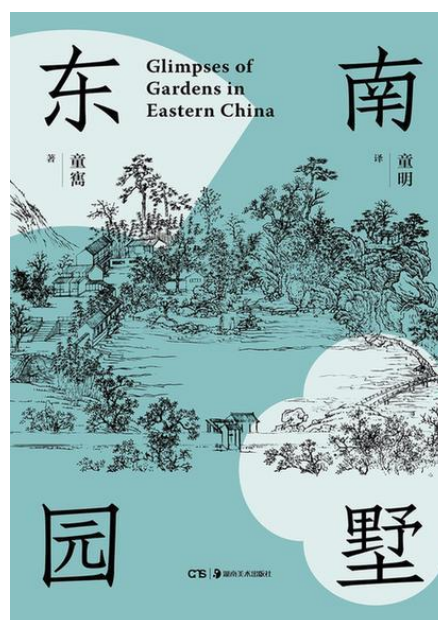
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TONG Jun (also known as Chuin Tung, 1900-1983) was a well-known architect who received education in the University of Pennsylvania in 1920s, and won great fame in China in the 1930s and 1940s. He was also a pioneer of Chinese garden study. His book, *Record of Jiangnan Gardens* <sup>[1]</sup>, finished in 1930s, is a historic achievement of Chinese garden research. Maggie Keswick expressed her gratitude to TONG Jun in the preface of *The Chinese Garden* (1978) as following: “I have not visited any monastery gardens or many, many of the gardens mentioned in Tong Jun’s (Chuin Tung) book of 1930s. As it is, I am deeply indebted to this book and also to Siren’s *Gardens of China* of 1949...”

*Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* is a manuscript in English by TONG Jun, and much of it was published in the journal *T’ien Hsia Monthly* in the 1930s. In his last days in the early 1980s, TONG Jun revised it and added some parts, such as the section on plants. In the 1990s, it was translated into Chinese and published bilingually <sup>[2]</sup>. In 2018, TONG Ming, grandson of TONG Jun, made a new version of Chinese translation and a new publication [Figure 1] <sup>[3]</sup>. In the new translation with more exact expressions, TONG Ming follows TONG Jun’s elegant writing style which reflects the special time of literature in the early 20th century and we can feel TONG Jun’s tone in a much closer way. In the new book, also bilingual, many new images are added. The photos were taken by a talented photographer specialized in Chinese gardens, and were selected with careful considerations, clearly showing the delicate change of garden atmosphere in different seasons and weathers. Well suited to the texts, the images made the reading experience more vivid, immersive and poetic, which is exactly the ideal effect Mr. TONG Jun wanted to achieve.

On December 9, 2018, a symposium was held in Suzhou Zhuozheng Yuan (The Humble Administrator’s Garden), a garden of TONG Jun’s favorites, focusing on the

understanding of TONG Jun’s garden study in the new context, together with the book launch of *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* in a new version. Nearly twenty scholars and architects attended and expressed their opinions on TONG Jun’s achievements and significance today [Figure 2].



**Figure 1.** Cover of *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* (2018). Source: Insight Media



**Figure 2.** Symposium site (Professor TONG Ming speaking). Source: Insight Media



**Figure 3.** Professor WANG Shu speaking. Source: Insight Media

TONG Ming, a professor from Shanghai Tongji University, introduced some features in his new translation of the manuscript, and some new understandings of TONG Jun's early activities in Chinese garden study, with new material and photos from his family collections. He explained why TONG Jun chose to study garden in the early 1930s, and how he carried out fieldwork and research.

WANG Shu [Figure 3], the 2012 Pritzker Architecture Prize winner and professor in China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, is the author of the preface in the new book. He was one of the first readers of the first Chinese version of *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* before its formal publication in the 1990s. After reading it for six times, he was greatly influenced by it. In his view, TONG Jun was one of the few scholars on Chinese gardens with sharp eyes of an architect. TONG's judgement that "taste, be it emphasized, counts here much more than mere know-how" is the key point in WANG Shu's own architectural theory. Another sentence from TONG's treatise, "even without flowers and trees it would still make a garden," has enabled WANG Shu to break the boundary of architecture and garden in his design practices.

DONG Yugan, a professor and architect from Beijing University, wrote another preface for the book. He quoted TONG's humorous comparison of gardens in the East and the West: "most conspicuous is the absence of the mown and bordered lawn, which, though attractive to the cow, has but little to appeal to the human intellect," pointing out the key feature of body's dwelling in Chinese gardens, "being entirely devoid of the jungle atmosphere" in TONG's words. He also found that what TONG paid attention to was never about the types but about the *quality* of gardens, which could be very useful in design thinking.

Many scholars on Chinese gardens showed their understandings of TONG Jun and his books.

Based on his comparison of TONG's two books, *Record of Jiangnan Gardens* and *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China*, Professor ZHU Guangya from Southeast University in Nanjing concluded four features in TONG's scholarship. The first is "pioneering," as he is the first one who studied Chinese gardens with a modern perspective. The second is "leading," as his work and method influenced later researchers greatly. The third is "comprehensive," as he has deep knowledge of both the East and the West, historical and contemporary. The fourth is "tolerant," as he was a modernist architect and a traditional garden advocator at the same time. Moreover, he had always maintained a low profile and kept his spirit of integrity.

Professor CHEN Wei in Southeast University expressed her understanding of Mr. TONG in two aspects. One is his incredible capability of shuttling through the ancient and the modern, the East and the West, and the other is that he could study gardens with passion while keeping his sharp eyes of critique at the same time.

GE Ming, a professor from Southeast University and also an architect, saw the precious quality in TONG's study that he greatly cherished his native culture but never promoted nationalism. TONG saw gardens in different cultures with profound understanding. This attitude allowed him to have a broad view and comprehensive study. He also had an excellent academic quality that he could properly connect various things with succinct words so that a new image could emerge.

In his recent study on TONG's work, Professor LU Andong from Nanjing University found traces of thinking in his writings and drawings, unlike most of today's books which only present the results. LU regards TONG as a humanist, whose discussion is about the relationship between humans and gardens which

transcended cultural differences and made the discussed objects international. Such humanist thinking also links gardens and architecture, making contemporary Chinese architecture benefitting greatly from traditional gardens.

DING Yao, from Tianjin University, found a clue of much earlier garden history from the Chinese book, *Dongnan yuanshu* 东南园墅, which was selected by TONG Jun himself. He reminded us to understand TONG's deep intentions in a much longer timeframe, not only in the recent history of some parts of China.

Comparing the three books TONG Jun worked on in his last years, GU Kai from Southeast University showed the broad perspective and grand structure that TONG Jun set up. The second edition of *Record of Jiangnan Gardens* is about Chinese gardens for Chinese readers, *Outline History of Garden Making* <sup>[4]</sup> is about international (especially Western) garden history for Chinese readers, and *Glimpses of Gardens in Eastern China* is about Chinese gardens for Western readers. We are still following the path TONG Jun showed us, and there is still a far way to go. And compared with LIU Dunzhen, another great researcher on Chinese gardens who focused on designing methods, TONG Jun's attention on perception in the garden study is of great value in today's scholarship, as the aspect of experience is indispensable in the understanding of a Chinese garden.

Some architects showed their understandings and inspirations from reading TONG Jun's works.

ZHUANG Shen, a partner of Atelier Archmixing in Shanghai, learned the way of thinking the whole through parts from TONG Jun's writings. TONG showed us how to think the world as an integral whole from details inside, different from the normal daily habit of seeing fragmental forms from outside. For an architect, such a thinking method is much more important than any designing means.

LIU Yichun, a partner of Atelier Deshaus in Shanghai, has been constantly focusing on Chinese gardens ever since his professional career started almost 20 years ago. However, he is not eager to use some garden forms directly to achieve an architectural aim. He quoted TONG Jun's words: "The scholar, and not the horticulturalist or the landscape architect, could well manage to design a classical Chinese garden any time," to emphasize the professional border of an architect needs to be crossed. Only a contemporary Chinese architect understands the tradition sufficiently and transforms it into the design in an intangible way, can a building be designed with real cultural identity in depth. He regards the thinking of "interdependence and appropriateness" in garden making as a significant way in his own architectural practice.

CHEN Yifeng, another principal partner of Atelier Deshaus, continuing TONG Jun's analogy of Chinese gardens with Chinese landscape paintings, made two further comparisons. The first is that to create a garden is to make a dream land in reality, just like the landscape painting, and to visit a garden is to escape the daily life temporarily. The second is that a garden can achieve the sense of landscape painting through the visual control such as layering and spatial compression, but not perspective, and it can be realized gradually through the walking process. Both the aim and the method can be inspirational in designing.

ZHANG Bin, the Principal of Atelier Z+, takes the garden as a mirror to reflect architecture. In his view, architecture has a tradition in the creation of buildings, but a garden does not. To create a Chinese garden is to make a system in which people can be connected to the outer world, which cannot be achieved by architecture today, because when you start to make a thing, you and the thing are separated. A Chinese garden is a tool to manage the relationship between humans and the world, embodying the whole Chinese

cultural system. It is not easy for contemporary architecture to cross such limitation. But TONG Jun had made us think about it.

ZHU Xiaofeng, from Scenic Architecture Office in Shanghai, learned much from TONG Jun's texts. In comparison of gardens in the East and the West, TONG uses some delicate words to show his subtle evaluation, for example, using "incautiousness" and "absurdity" for describing Chinese gardens, seeming critical but actually commendatory, while at the same time, using words of "monumental beauty" for Italian villas and "simple charm" for English gardens, which are also carefully selected. Mr. ZHU also found the highest level of Chinese garden appreciation in TONG's sentence: "Worlds open out to him, verses and inscriptions carry away his imagination, and vistas tempt his curiosity," as it shows the aim of experience of body and mind as well as field making of culture, time, and space.

Dr FENG Lu, the Principal of Wuyang Architecture, understood TONG Jun in the relationship between gardens and architecture in the new era. Some architects today want to obtain new knowledge through discussing gardens, and there is a transformation from "architecture in gardens" to "garden as architecture." TONG Jun's writings function as the foundation of such a discussion. For example, in describing Chinese garden experience, TONG uses "delay," which is a word with theoretical depth, referring to a special kind of temporality, different from that of "time in movement." Such discussions on this book may lead to new possibilities in understanding architecture.

With wide-range different perspectives, scholars and architects in this symposium made very insightful discussions on the understanding of TONG Jun and his writings about gardens, showing the contemporary significance that a classic work can bring.

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