


My first trip to China would not be complete without a visit to Liyuan Garden in Kaiping District of Guangdong

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By Greg Hugh, Staff Writer



Liyuan Garden Entrance

A highlight of my recent trip to China was to visit Liyuan Garden in the Kaiping District of Guangdong. In 2007, the Garden was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of the Kaiping Diaolou and Villages. "Diaolou" is a term used to describe fortified multi-storied tower-like structures that exquisitely integrate western architectural style with Chinese architectural style. This garden should not be mistaken with another famous garden referred to by the same name which is located in the lower Yangtze valley on Lihu Lake in southwest Wuxi which we also visited on this trip.

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The significance of our visit to this site is that my brother-in-law and other friends of mine that I knew while growing up in Chicago are descendents of the family that built the garden. As noted in an accompanying article, my wife, sister-in-law and I were picked up at the conclusion of the Moy Family Convention in Guangdong by Helen Liang from the Guangdong Kaiping Diaolou Tourism Development Corp., Ltd. who was kind enough to provide a car and driver to take us to Kaiping, a two hour drive from Guangdong, to give us a tour of the Garden and assist us in arranging a visit to my Mom's village in the Taishan area.

Liyuan Garden is located at Tangkou Township in Kaiping and was built by an overseas Chinese by the name of Xie Weli. Weili (1893-1970) lived in Chicago, U.S.A. and made his fortune by running a medicinal herbs trade with his father, Xie Shengpan. As a result of central government policy at the time, the Kaiping and Taishan areas of China were the major sources of emigrants at the turn of the 20th century to other parts of the world and many of them immigrated to Canada, Australia and America. Weili returned home with a lot of money under his father's order to organize the construction of the villas 'panli' and 'Panwen' in their clan's village, Geng Hua.

Completed in 1936 after about 10 years of construction, Liyuan Garden has been referred to as a bright pearl in the sea of gardens designed by Overseas Chinese and is the one with unique architectural style which can well match the Four Famous Gardens in Guangdong.

Based on the Grand View Garden described in the Chinese classic, a Dream of Red Mansions, Liyuan takes in much of the Chinese traditional garden architecture and integrates it with the features of European and American villas of its time, a successful combination of Chinese and the West. It also enjoys the reputation of being a Grand View Garden only smaller in size.

This unique garden is a perfect combination of the modernist western architectural style of the period and the traditional landscaping of China. The distinctive characteristics make this elegant garden unique among Chinese gardens. A special feature of the garden is the wide and deep canals which string together the architectural features of the garden. Above the canals, there are winding corridors, fine bridges and exquisite pavilions. The layout of the garden can be delimited into the Villa Zone, Grand Garden and Little Garden.

Entering the garden from the front entrance and walking along the art corridor, you will find the Villa Zone, which contains six villas and an ancient watchtower (dialou). Covered with double-tier roofs and green glaze tiles, the Panwenlou Villa and the Panlilou Villa are the two most magnificent villas. Italian building materials are used for flooring and the staircase, and the walls are decorated with grand frescos, delicate embossments and lifelike metal-coated woodcarvings. Adorned with western fireplaces and artistic ancient lamps, the rooms look more elegant with elaborate blackwood furniture inside. A bronze statue of the garden's master stands in front of the Panlilou Villa.

The Grand Garden Zone lies to the west of the Villa Zone and comprises several extraordinary buildings. The majestic Memorial Archway was built in 1926-1936, and has a width of 37.7 feet and a height of 36 feet. Closely behind the Memorial Archway is a stately Decorated Archway which is roofed with green glazed tiles. It consists of a main building 21.3 feet high and two accessory buildings which are 16.4 feet high. To the east of the Decorated Archway, there stands a unique structure called the Bird's Nest. The top is built in ancient Roman style while the middle part looks more like the Chinese paper cutting. Inside the Bird's Nest, there is a pond and rockwork populated with peacocks and other birds. The elegant Hua Teng (Flower Vine) Pavilion is a closed structure built with numerous grilles and the roof is shaped like the crown of the Queen of England. The Yupei Villa is a tower dwelling located in the southwest of the Garden Zone. The four-storey construction shows high architectural skill, blending Chinese, Japanese, Italian and ancient Roman styles.

Connected with the Villa Zone by canals, the Little Garden Zone is characterized by fancy bridges and bijou pavilions, including Kuahong Bridge, Wanxiang Pavilion, Chanchun Pavilion and Guanlan Bridge. The hexagonal Yicui Pavilion is engraved with a golden dragon and vivid designs of the Eight Immortals in the inner roof. Excellent couplets written by luminaries are scattered across the buildings, and they add a cultured air to the beautiful Liyuan Garden

The well-preserved artistic works in Liyuan Garden are extensive, consisting of the large scale colored paintings, golden lacquer woodcarving, porcelain figurines and American sanitary fittings and water supply system made at that time. Buildings in the garden include a big arch writing "Liyuan Garden", a big decorated archway writing "Xiu Shen Li Ben", four pavilion bridges ("Fragrant Night", "Water Playing", "Waves Watch" and "Yicui"), the Roman building "Bird's Nest" and "Vine Pavilion". The calligraphies and antithetical couplets, especially, make the garden rich in traditional Chinese culture.

The uniqueness of the Liyuan Garden can not only be seen from the composition of the architectures, but also from the plants in the garden: flowers, grasses, potted plants and fruit trees of considerable kinds which we were unfortunately not able to experience due to the time of year that we were visiting.

The landscape architecture of the garden zone was based on both the design of western landscape and the landscaping elements of classic Chinese garden. Despite living in the United States, the owner, Xie Weili had established a very profound feeling for Chinese culture. Since he had lived in the critical era of the exclusion of Chinese with conflicts between Chinese and western culture occurring in contemporary China, a very strong sense of the trend of the times was revealed in his idealistic landscaping.

Fortunately Liyuan Garden has survived the turmoil's of government unrest through the years and in 1983 the garden was first listed as one of the historic reservations of county grade by the People's Government of Kaiping County. In October 1999, Ms. Xie Yu Yaoqiong, the widow of the garden owner wrote a letter to entrust the People's Government of Kaiping City to administer the garden for 50 years and in 2007 was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Since then, the famous garden has been completely renewed and expanded. It will eventually likely become one of the first-class tourist spots in China.

Editor's Note: *Some of the material included in this article were taken from sources believed to be reliable along with use of some file photos.*