**Gardens and the Good Life in Confucianism and Daoism**

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**1. Introduction**

Gardens and gardening do not commonly feature in contemporary philosophical reflections on virtues and the good life. Few would deny that making and experiencing gardens can be a source of aesthetic and physical goods – aesthetic pleasures, physical exercise, calm and rest – but less attention is paid to the idea they might also afford specifically moral goods. This is odd because the moral significance of gardens and gardening is constantly attested to in many historical discourses about gardens. In the words of one contemporary philosopher:

The designing, making, and appreciation of gardens—and the comportment of lives within and in relation to gardens—have been of importance to men and women since the days of the ancient empires of Persia and China. In neglecting the garden, philosophy is therefore ignoring not merely a current fashion, but activities and experiences of abiding human significance.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Appreciation of the moral significance of gardens has not gone away, either, even if popular accounts of why gardening matters typically begin with more quotidian reasons like exercise, fitness, and having something to do at the weekend. The distinguished garden writer, Sir Roy Strong, once asked himself, ‘What is the most important thing I’ve done with my life’, and answered ‘To have made a garden’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some speak of intimacy or ‘oneness’ with nature, quiet satisfaction in thoughtfully exercising skills, of exercises of imagination and care, and so on. Here the reasons why people make and maintain gardens take on a more obviously moral character.

An interesting aspect of accounts of the moral significance of gardens, across many of the world’s traditions, are the connections to human virtues or excellences, including a range of personal dispositions, sensibilities, and admirable attainments. We can see the virtues and excellences at work in different clusters of activities – the designing and making of gardens, their maintenance and care, and appreciative experience of and engagements in them. Which are salient depends on the gardener: one of my neighbours finds the deepest satisfactions in the ‘work of care’ and the constant activity of watering, pruning, replanting, and tending that go into maintaining a garden. Another neighbour finds ‘a private bliss’ in the carefully created calm and stillness of what they call the ‘watercolour simplicity’ of their garden. In both cases, my green-thumbed neighbours find being in their gardens *edifying*, an opportunity to cultivate and exercise the virtues and attainments conducive to a good and flourishing human life.

Gardening is rarely counted among the edifying arts, those, such as painting or poetry, able to enrich our sensibilities and exercise virtues, creation or appreciation of which ‘opens the hearts, mind, and senses’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some of the fault lies with G.W.F. Hegel who judged gardening an ‘imperfect art’ and saw gardens as pleasing, but ‘worth nothing in themselves’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Doubtless many others reasons are at work, too, including a blunt sense that talk of the moral or edifying power of garden-making and appreciation is too high-falutin’. For those sceptics, gardens are nice places where one can do nice things – that is all. However, the scepticism is guilty of ignorance. Conceptions of the significance of gardens are plural and do change over time. Instrumental and hedonistic reasons for gardening like exercise and pleasure are compelling for some people, but hardly exhaust the range of reasons people give for why they garden.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the last two centuries, gardening has rarely been counted among the edifying arts, but that was not always so. In the eighteenth century, writers like Pope and Walpole had lots to say about the morally edifying role of gardens. Moreover, there are still plenty of writers who defend edificationist conceptions of gardening. Cooper invites us to understand creation, care, and appreciation of gardens as conducive to the cultivation of a variety of virtues and sensibilities: the garden is ‘a theatre of garden-practices’, a place ‘hospitable’ to the exercise of ‘reverie, memory, and imagination.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, instrumentalist and hedonistic accounts often point to wider edificationist claims. For Roger Scruton, aesthetic appreciation of gardens can contribute to a maturing of our wider capacities for ‘taking life seriously, and becoming truly conscious of our affairs’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Experiences of beauty need not be reductively taken as reports of pleasing subjective sensations. One can understand deep experiences of beauty in terms of longing and love, for instance, or as apprehensions of moral ideals made manifest.[[8]](#footnote-8) In these cases, the beauty one finds in gardens may be more than nice feelings in nice places; it may gesture to deeper connections between beauty, goodness, and human sensibility.

Scepticism about the moral significance of gardens is partly a product of the neglect of *garden-practices*, the many mental, imaginative, and physical tasks ‘geared to the design, cultivation, and care of the garden’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since the emergence of philosophical aesthetics in the eighteenth century, the focus has been the *aesthetic appreciation* of gardens, a symptom of which is fixation on questions like ‘Is garden appreciation more like appreciation of art or of nature?’[[10]](#footnote-10) But gardens do not just spring ready-made out of the ground. They must be created and maintained and, moreover, most people do not just sit and look at their gardens but are actively engaged with them. Much goes on in a garden – from parties and convivial drinks to deep and meaningful conversations and meditative *reverié* to birdwatching to games and play. There is scope for virtues in all these activities, like hospitableness and thoughtfulness and spontaneity. But these activities are integrated aspects of the wider lifestyle of a gardener, a life whose structure and rhythm is to a degree defined by the needs of their garden. It is true that some people garden as an idle hobby or occasional chore, like washing the windows. But this is not usually what we mean when we call someone a *gardener*. Cooper makes this point when denying that gardening is a hobby:

Gardening [is not] an activity, like stamp-collecting or water-colouring, that can be ‘taken up’ and ‘left off’ almost at will—an activity, moreover, that may well be a ‘bolt-on’ extra to a life that otherwise goes on relatively unaffected by it. The point … is that the specific demands and development of the ‘materials’—the need, say, of certain plants to be pruned at a certain time of the year—constrain and shape the gardener’s life. The life of a serious gardener is not one that, as it happens, involves some gardening. Instead, it is one partly defined by the structured, regular activities which are imposed once the decision to grow and to garden is made.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A serious gardener is therefore characterised as much by their attitudes and commitments to their garden as to the regular performance of certain activities. After initial reticence, my two neighbours spoke of their gardens in terms of love, devotion, concern, and affection – a point reiterated by the television gardener, Alan Titchmarsh, when saying that gardening was, other than having children, ‘the most rewarding thing in life’. When attention turns to the practices constitutive of gardening, we begin to see how they may relate to virtues – they can manifest positive emotions like love and affection, for instance, and afford structured opportunities for sustained exercises of attentiveness and creativity. For one authority on Japanese gardening, ‘caring for the garden is not a chore, but the very point of having a garden in the first place’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Here we have a summary statement of the aspects of gardens and gardening that are vital to edificationist conceptions of gardening. Creating and caring for a garden is a long-term project whose success requires commitment and devotion and love and proper performance of a range of activities that involve such virtues and sensibilities as attentiveness, carefulness, humility, imaginativeness, thoughtfulness, and a sensitivity to the natures and needs of plants and creatures. The commitment to a garden also provides a sense of structure and routine to one’s life – a life that is experienced as an integrated set of commitments, rather than a mess of ongoing activities lacking integration or unity. In this chapter, I elaborate this edificationist conception of gardening and emphasise the role within it of artistic activities, like composing poetry or performing music. My focus are the Chinese traditions which identify deep resonances between cultured practices and natural environments that were most fully realised within gardens.

**Gardens and the good life**

The claim that gardens can be edifying will depend on wider conceptions about the good life for human beings and the sorts of activities and experiences conducive to it. The question for this section is what those conceptions must be like if making and appreciating gardens are to seem relevantly edifying. After all, all sorts of activities could in principle help us build virtues, but some of them only trivially. We must therefore explain how gardening, virtues, and the good life are coherently connected. To do this, we can look at some very general conceptions of the significance of gardens and some of the specific sorts of edificationism that go with them.

Across the eastern and western garden discourses, we find at least three conceptions of the significance of gardens to human beings. Cooper labels them *triumphalist*, *sanctuary*, and *productive* gardens. Each conception includes moral ambitions and personal excellences salient to – manifested in and cultivated by – those gardens.

(i) *triumphalist gardens* express assertive anthropocentric visions of the superiority of human beings and their cultures over nature. Some announce the superiority of specific people, such as Louis XIVs garden at Versailles or the 18th century Chinese Yuánmíng Yuán, the ‘Garden of Perfect Brightness’, intended by its sponsor, the Kangzi Emperor, as ‘an earthly reflection of his greatness’.[[13]](#footnote-13) More nuanced triumphalist gardens, however, declare the superiority not of specific human beings but of humanity itself, like the French gardens that, for Schopenhauer, were ‘tokens of [nature’s] slavery’, mirroring the ‘will of the possessor’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Another subtle form of triumphalist gardens were the Renaissance gardens that, under humanist influence, sought to contrast the orderliness of well-crafted gardens with wild natural landscapes. The gardens of Genoa encountered by the English writer and gardener, John Evelyn, were admired as enduring symbols of human ingenuity – ‘beautified with a tarrac supported by pillars of Marble … huge Iron Worke very stupendious to consider … Fountaines, Grotts & States; among which one of Jupiter of a Colossal magnitude … a most admirable piece of art’.[[15]](#footnote-15) A few centuries later, this would be the sort of garden praised by Hegel, since it symbolises our no longer being ‘sunk in nature’, but now – proud and self-assured – standing above it, imposing order and form. Triumphalist gardens are rooted in conceptions of human beings as creatures distinct and separate from the natural world, proud creators and shapers of a nature experienced as rude, unformed, and plastic, available for modification so to better serve human needs. The relevant virtues here are muscular, promethean: assertiveness, creativity, magnificence, and pride in the effort to ‘enslave’ and ‘beautify’ wild natural places.

(ii) *gardens of sanctuary* are places of retreat from oppressive and discouraging aspects of the wider world, whether aesthetic pollution, the complexity and artificiality of life, or the awful pressures and pace of the social world with all its temptations and demands. For some people, the garden, once ‘a place for man to escape from the threats of nature’, has become a ‘refuge from men’.[[16]](#footnote-16) The sanctuary functions of gardens depend on a contrast with the world and its people. For one garden scholar, many people experienced the stillness and seclusion of their gardens in stark contrast to the ‘rage, death, and endless suffering’ of human life.[[17]](#footnote-17) Sanctuary gardens offer relief from the pressures and demands of life but are also spaces where one could seek rejuvenation: the calm feel and still atmosphere of the garden and the gentle regularity of watering and pruning all contribute to a sense of sanctuary or refuge. We find such gardens of sanctuary in the Chinese tradition. Táo Yuānmíng (365-427) liked secluded gardens where he could enjoy a peaceful harmony receptive to going ‘back to nature’ and ‘waking up’ to the ‘meaning of life’.[[18]](#footnote-18) The statesman and historian Sima Guang (1019-86), created his ‘garden of solitary delight’ as a place where he could live ‘uninhibited’, his life once more ‘under [his] own control’.[[19]](#footnote-19) For their admirers, sanctuary gardens are apt environments for the exercise of quietist virtues like contemplativeness, reflectiveness, and tranquillity. Being in them offers aesthetically and atmospherically hospitable environments for activities made difficult within the busyness of the outer world—a theme I return to in the following section.

(iii) *productive gardens* include kitchen gardens, allotments, and other ‘working gardens’ with the practical function of yielding produce – fruits, vegetables, flowers, nuts, and berries either for consumption or for sale. Slow Food enthusiasts like gardens for this reason, as do people enthused about healthy and wholesome lifestyles where one grows one’s own in ways which improve one’s physical and psychological health. At a deeper level, productive gardens might be experienced as opportunities for the cooperative activity of individual effort and nature, a place where a productive gardener ‘merges his or her own energy and resources with those of nature’ in order to yield *good* things – healthy, nourishing, wholesome, beautiful things.[[20]](#footnote-20) Unlike the triumphal gardener, the creativity of a productive gardener in inflected by a different, softer set of virtues – cooperativeness, gentleness, sensitivity to the needs and natures of plants and trees, and what Gabriel Marcel nicely called ‘creative receptivity’. The productive garden is a place of life and energy and vitality that one sees in the gardener as much as their garden. Cooper noted this in the 2016 Royal Academy Exhibition, *Painting the Modern Garden*, many of whose paintings depicted the garden as ‘a cornucopia of growth, fertility, energy and abundance’, something reflected in the vigour and strength of their gardeners.[[21]](#footnote-21) Here we see a set of vitalist virtues – abundance, liveliness, robustness, vigorousness, and wholesomeness. Such qualities fit with a conception of human beings as embodied worldly agents, albeit one without the proud intrusiveness of triumphalism or the quietist diffidence of those who seek sanctuary from the world.

By surveying these different conceptions of the garden, we see quite different conceptions of the virtues or qualities that make up a good human life. Triumphal gardens are hooked into a dominionistic vision of human beings as the masters and shapers of nature, imposers of artificial form onto raw wildness. Sanctuary gardens portray cultivated natural spaces as places of refuge or escape from the dangers and pressures of a worldly life no longer found bearable. Productive gardens are attached to visions of human beings are natural worldly creatures whose greatest satisfactions come from creative cooperation with natural creatures and processes.

We can also draw two lessons about virtues and gardens. First, an edificationist cannot talk vaguely of ‘the virtues’ apt to be cultivated by experiences of and engagements with gardens. A certain kind of garden is apt for exercise of certain sets of virtues and dispositions, whose salience is shaped by background conceptions of the good human life. Second, we must distinguish different *forms* or *inflections* of the virtues, some of which appeared in different types of garden. Creativity showed up in accounts of the triumphalist and productive gardens since each of them emphasises human agency and activity, albeit in the very different modes of anthropocentric imposition and ‘creative receptivity’. Humility, too, can be a virtue one can cultivate in the still calm of sanctuary gardens or during moments of the felt co-dependence of natural processes and creative agency within productive gardens. So, an edificationist must be careful to describe the types of gardens they have in mind and the different sets of virtues and sensibilities integral to their operative vision of the good life.

Two points about vices and failings can also be made. One is that just because certain gardens were morally conceived as edifying spaces does not mean that they were always put to that use. In her classic study of Chinese garden history, Maggie Keswick corrects the genteel image of *literati* gardens as populated by a ‘scholar recluse sensitively appreciating the subtle changes of the seasons’ while perusing the *Book of Odes*. In reality, their gardens were more often than not home to ‘raucous drinking parties, elaborate banquets … and noisy groups of visitors enjoying gaudy lantern displays’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Triumphal and productive gardens could simply be corrupted or put to uses other than their edifying moral ones. Another point is that the traits that are virtuous on one conception of the garden may appear as vicious on another. Consider Cooper’s example of Neil Boyd McEacharn, the botanist and gardener who created the Villa Taranto garden on Lake Maggiore, whose attitudes and outlook were clearly triumphalist: ‘we attacked the woods first ... getting rid of ... deformed chestnuts and some unattractive pines … I had installed a Deccaville railway, the type we had used in Salonika in the 1914-18 War’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Doubtless McEacharn saw his actions as signs of determination, industriousness, and human assertiveness, all triumphalist virtues; however, those same traits will seem like vices to other types of gardener. Admirers of sanctuary gardens see them as precisely the overbearing and overwhelming human tendencies from which they seek sanctuary, while the productive gardener seems them as destructive and reckless.

The upshot is that an edificationist who wants to articulate the moral significance of the making, maintaining, and appreciation of gardens must take care to state the conceptions of the garden and the good life at work. As we will now see, these conceptions determine what connections, if any, obtain between gardens, self-cultivation, and the arts.

**Confucians in the garden**

In the Chinese tradition, one finds philosophical reflection on the significance of gardening for a good and flourishing human life. As we will see, the nature of that significance depends on the tradition in question. The Confucian tradition describes connections between gardens and artistic practices, but they are, I will argue, contingent ones: there were no *necessary* reasons to experience gardens as edifying spaces. Within the Daoist tradition, by contrast, we find very different conceptions of a good human life that lend a specific significance to gardens as arenas for edifying arts.

At its most general, Confucianism is the moral tradition sustained by the teachings and personal example of Kǒngzı (Confucius, 551-479 BCE), as recorded in the collection of remarks and observations known in the West as the *Analects* (the *Lúnyǔ*, the ‘selected conversations’ or ‘edited remarks’). The moral ideal of Confucianism is to become a *jūnzǐ*, the consummately cultivated person with the appropriate array of moral, social, and aesthetic attainments: they include moral virtues like truthfulness, excellence in ritual conduct, filial devotion to one’s parents, and mastery of traditional aesthetic and artistic excellences. The latter include the Six Arts (*liu yi*) – including poetry, archery, and calligraphy – and knowledge of the Six Classics (*liu jing*) that include historical classics concerning rites, music, and history. A Confucian works to ‘set [their] mind upon learning’, understood not just as acquiring ritual, musical, historical, and cultural knowledge but actively applying this to transform their conduct, to ‘practice what [one] has learned’ (§§ 2.4, 1.1). Such moral self-cultivation requires a whole range of positive influences and appropriate social and interpersonal conditions, like the presence of virtuous exemplars, a stable and prosperous society, and opportunities to study and practice cultured arts (*wen*).

The cultured arts are central to the Confucian project of moral self-cultivation. Poetry affords not only pleasure but also offers ‘a source of inspiration and a basis for evaluation’, at least the classic poems gathered in the *Book of Odes* (17.9). Music is constantly connected to moral sensitivity and refinement (3.3) and refines our affective capacities (3.29) and is also an apt metaphor for the process of moral self-cultivation – the metaphor of harmony being very popular (3.27). The creation and performance and appreciation of literature, music, and ritual is therefore edifying – they cultivate our sensitivities, exercise our virtues, refine our emotions and provide models and metaphors for the disciplined process of moral self-cultivation. When Kǒngzı summarises his moral vision, the arts have a central role:

Set your heart upon the Way, rely upon Virtue, lean upon Goodness, and explore widely in your cultivation of the arts. (7.6)

Find inspiration in the *Odes*, take your place through ritual, and achieve perfection with music. (8.8)

Clearly Confucianism has a conception of virtue and flourishing that incorporates appreciative engagement in cultured arts. The consummate Confucian ideal – the *jūnzǐ* – has mastered the classical arts and loves and performs music and reads and writes poetry.

Kǒngzı himself says much less, though, about the importance of natural places and creatures as components of a good life. In one famous remark, he did not ask about the fates of the horses after being told his stables burned down (10.17) and elsewhere he endorses the practice of animal sacrifice despite the moral protests of a disciple (3.17). More generally, we find little explicit discussion in the *Analects* about the importance to moral self-cultivation of experiences of and engagements with animals and natural places. Granted, there are a couple of famously cryptic comments about rivers (6.23, 9.17), but they hardly amount to any ‘green’ dimension to Confucian consummateness. The closest one gets to a sense that a consummate life must involve experiences of natural places is a poignant passage where Kǒngzı questions his disciples about their aspirations. Most offer ambitious social and political reforms, but one, Zengxi quietly offers a very different ideal:

Zengxi then said, “In the third month of Spring, once the Spring garments have been completed, I should like to assemble a company of five or six young men and six or seven boys to go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master’s house.”

The Master sighed deeply, saying, “I am with Zengxi!” (11.26).

Here is a claim that the ideal life is not one of strenuous social activism and statecraft, but of gentle enjoyment of friendship, music, and ritual performances in the presence of nature. The sigh suggests Kǒngzı felt longing for that life, even if he could not embrace it. A virtuous person must commit themselves to moral reformism. During his own lifetime, Kǒngzı came to regard his moral project as impossible, often voicing a desire to give up and flee China (5.7, 5.27). By the end of his life, the moral activism was replaced by the more modest ambition of preserving the deteriorated rituals and culture of the earlier dynasties to await better times, since Kǒngzı could not bring himself to withdraw into seclusion (18.6).

Kǒngzı had an edificationist conception of the arts but little sense there would be any specific role for gardens or gardening. The closest we get to gardeners are the scholar-recluses described in Books Fourteen and Eighteen of the *Analects* who also judged their age to be ‘disordered’ and chose to respond through quietist retreat into humble occupations and inconspicuous lives in the countryside. Unfortunately, they all criticise Kǒngzı’s zealous preoccupation with reform of the human world. Interestingly, the recluses reveal themselves by subtly displaying artistic skills – reciting poetry (14.39), singing a song filled with learned references (18.5), and speaking in enigmatic rhyming verse (18.7).

In the later Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279 CE), though, we start to see Confucians embracing gardens. A main innovation were the *literati* gardens, which were popular with jaded and morally frustrated scholars and officials who felt they could no longer participate in the morally corrupted world. A distinctively tradition emerged of Confucian eremeticism or reclusion.[[24]](#footnote-24) According to this tradition , frustrated Confucians resorted to voluntary withdrawal from political life as a form of moral protest against the gross moral and cultural deterioration of the age. (Other strategies of withdrawal included wilful eccentricity, public debauchery, and feigning loyalty to fallen dynasties).[[25]](#footnote-25) Such withdrawals meant relief from the corrupting pressures of the social world and also acted as a symbolic protest against its moral failings, the probative force of the withdrawal coming from the pronounced Confucian ideal of obedient service to the state. Unlike Daoist or Buddhist reclusion, the Confucian reclusion was ‘disengagement from society that maintained the symbolic order and hierarchical social values of the Confucian orthodoxy’.[[26]](#footnote-26)

A favourite destination for the Confucians eremetics were the *literati* gardens, cultivated spaces find desirable as moral refuges from the corruptions of the world and awful exposure to those whom Maggie Keswick dubs ‘vulgarians’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Essentially, the *literati* gardens were for the Confucian eremetics ‘gardens of sanctuary’ where they could quietly devote themselves to the appreciation of the arts. In the peaceful seclusion of a *literati* garden, an eremitic was able to read and study the classics, paint and draw, and perform and listen to music. We see in some of the poetry of the period a mood of resignation tempered by the modest pleasures of artistic activity in natural places. Much of this owed to interfusions of Confucian, Buddhism, and Daoist themes. Consider these lines from the celebrated Tang Dynasty poet, painter, and musician, Wáng Wéi (699–759):

In old age I ask for peace

and don’t care about things of this world

I’ve found no good way to live

and brood about getting lost in my old forests.

The wind blowing in the pines loosens my belt,

the mountain moon is my lamp while I tinkle

my lute.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Five hundred years later, Sima Guang’s *Garden of Solitary Enjoyment* celebrated the garden as a place to escape ‘the dust and grime of the city’, his metaphor for the restlessness and morally crumpling effects of immersion in a social world of busy demands. Other Chinese writings of this long period – from the C4th ‘Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion’ to Chen Fuyao’s *Flower Mirror* – emphasise the conduciveness of a garden to decorous social conduct, edifying conversation, and a conviviality and harmony depressingly absent outside the garden walls. Indeed, such tensions between the corrupting realities of the world and the edifying possibilities of life in a *literati* garden became a common theme of literature of the period. Táo Yuānmíng (365-427)’s famous fable, *The Peach Blossom Spring*, describes a small isolated utopian community into which a jaded outsider stumbles. He eventually gains a sense of going ‘back to nature’ and ‘waking up’ to the ‘meaning of life’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Táo is credited with inventing the ‘poetry of the fields and gardens’, a bucolic style exemplified in a three-poem series, ‘Substance, Shadow, Spirit’, which describe the conflicts between worldly ambition and the simple pleasures of fellowship, music, and natural places. In Chinese literary history, Táo’s poem, *Home Again!* ‘established forever the ideal of the home and garden as a personal retreat, haven, paradise, and world apart’.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Here we see changing Confucian attitudes towards gardens as edifying spaces. Kǒngzı is indifferent to engagements with natural places and creatures since the edifying sources and practices for him were all drawn from the human world of ritual and tradition. As later Confucians judged moral and cultural conditions to be worsening, however, they started to see certain gardens as edifying spaces. Abandoning civic and political life, they withdrew into their *literati* gardens, remaining discreetly within the human world in an environment where they could devote themselves to the cultured arts.

The edificationism of Kǒngzı was relocated from the corrupted social world to the modest humanised space of a *literati* garden. Indeed, those gardens did see a lot of painting and poetry and musical performance. Shen Fu said of his garden of Cāng Làng Tíng, the Blue Waves Pavilion, that he his wife spent their days ‘doing nothing but reading, discussing the classics, enjoying the moonlight or idly admiring the flowers … no life could be happier than this’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Here we see Confucian edificationism proceeding well enough in a sanctuary garden. But this is not quite good enough to secure more ambitious claims about gardening, artistic endeavours, and the good life. What is missing is an emphasis on *gardening* itself, construed as a set of arts in their own right, and any sense that the setting of a garden is integral to music and other arts. What we need, then, is a conception of the good life which clearly connects together gardening, the arts, and the good life.

**Daoists in the garden**

‘Dao’ is a versatile Chinese term, usually translated as ‘way’, and later the name given to a loose set of figures living around the time of Kǒngzı, such as a legendary figure, Lǎozǐ and a historical figure, Zhuāngzǐ. The concept *Dao* has various meanings in the texts gathered under the Daoist label – mainly the *Dàodéjīng* and the Book of *Zhuāngzǐ* – but one is of a way as an art or practice. In Daoist and other east Asian traditions, ways (*dao*) include bodily, moral, emotional, and spiritual disciplines aimed the care and enhancement of one’s capacities and character. Ways include what Westerners call ‘arts and crafts’, like calligraphy and flower arranging (*kado*) to the ‘martial arts’ like *judo* and *aikido* through to such everyday practices as preparing food, serving tea (*chado*), dressing oneself and, of course, gardening. Ways are embodied practices involving discipline, practice, training and discipleship, mastery of skills and bodies of knowledge, trained sensibility, and expertise with tools and utensils – paintbrushes, bow and arrows, and hoes and trowels. At a deeper level, ways involve cultivation of one’s moral, mental, and spiritual capacities—ways are edifying, insofar as extend to ‘any artistic practice … viewed as a self-cultivational practice leading to enlightenment, for those with the dedication to pursue a practice with such diligence and seriousness of purpose’.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The metaphor of a way is central to Daoism – indeed, the philosophical tradition came to be known as *Daojiao*, the School (of House) of the Way. What Daoists are committed to isn’t Confucian ritual excellence or diligent public service but forms of ‘bio-spiritual cultivation’, a cultivation of one’s bodily integrity and a distinctive set of *de* (‘virtues’, ‘powers’) hence the title *Dàodéjīng* – ‘The Classic of the Way and Virtue (or Power)’.[[33]](#footnote-33) What Daoists aspire to is a sense of harmony with the Dao, the ineffable ‘source’ that generates all experienced things, often characterised as a ‘wellspring’ from which things ‘flow’. The *Dàodéjīng* tells us that the ‘true person’ – the *zhēnrén* – successfully ‘follows the Way of Heaven’ (D 9, 25) by emulating an array of qualities attributed to the Way. Central among these is *ziran* (‘spontaneity’, literally ‘self-so-ness’), not in the sense of capriciousness or surrender to one’s emotions, but what one scholar explains as alert, supple ‘responsiveness in the impersonal calm when vision is most lucid’.[[34]](#footnote-34) A spontaneous person is, like the Way of Heaven, unconstrained by narrow horizons or worldly goals and, like water, smoothly ‘flows’ from one situation to another, ‘following along with things’. Within the *Book of Zhuāngzǐ*, we see exemplars of spontaneity, displaying their masterful spontaneity in such ‘ways’ as swimming, wood carving, and musical performance.

The Daoist texts offer an edificationist ideal centred on ‘ways’ that enable one to live in ways characterised by spontaneity, adaptability, responsiveness, and other *de*. Moreover, their moral vision emphasises both artistic activities and the natural world. Zhuāngzǐ’s many exemplars of spontaneity are craftspeople, like the famous bell-stand maker who goes into the forest to carefully select the tree with the right ‘inborn heavenly nature’ (ch.19) or the legendary Yellow Emperor who played music by integrating his playing with the sounds and activities of insects, birds, and the sounds of the forest – a paradigmatic model of both *spontaneity*, of being ‘carried along’ by Dao, but also of *harmony* with the creatures of the forest (ch. 14). Wáng Wéi, writing much later, inherited these sensibilities:

You ask what the principle is for achieving the Way –

A fisherman’s song going deep into the river bank.

In these sorts of remarks, Daoists emphasise the intimacy of human artistic efforts and the natural world. The Yellow Emperor did not just play outside because he felt like it. His music was shaped by and responsive to the noises, squawks, hum and calls of the insects and birds around him and so produced ‘unforced and uncontrived’ sounds (ch. 14). His ideal was shared by Claude Debussy who aspired to compose ‘a kind of music composed especially for the open air … which would sport and skim among the tree-tops in the sunshine and fresh air’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here is creative receptivity based on mutual inflections of human artistic practice and the contributions and context provided by nature. The Yellow Emperor could not have created the music he desired in his palace or a concert hall because it intimately depended on the cooperative contributions of nature – on what one musicologist calls ‘the mutual inflections of music and place’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Similarly, Daoist poems often capture transient moments while favourite themes of Daoist painting are vast landscapes, mountains wrapped in cloud, and gnarled trees through which one can espy modest signs of human life, like Dai Jin’s *Travelers Through the Mountain Passes* or Qu Sing’s *Summer Mountains*.

The Daoist tradition recognises arts and ways as edifying if they enable us to emulate the spontaneity they see as characteristic of Dao. That rules out rule-bound ways of painting, rigid conformity to established canons of composition, and other ossified forms of artistic production and appreciation. But it allows for spontaneous styles of creativity that can be inspired by natural places, creatures, and landscapes. For this reason, Daoism is emphatic about the importance of appropriate ways of experiencing and engaging with the natural world. But does this include appreciation of gardening? Some misinterpret the goal as a sort of primitive existence, a mistake encouraged by images of barefoot sages wandering alone through the mountains. Others suppose Daoist hostility to violent, intrusive actions – such exploiting animals or deforesting landscapes – must extend to the practice of gardening itself. An American lecturer found his students disappointed and angry to learn that Daoists enjoyed creatively shaping their natural environments, their view being that ‘a true nature lover would simply leave nature alone’.[[37]](#footnote-37)

What those students got wrong was the Daoist conviction that moral self-cultivation must involve edifying engagements with the natural world, something totally incompatible with ‘leaving it alone’. Consider Zhuāngzǐ’s characterisation of the *zhēnrén*:they honour the ways of all the creatures and things they encounter, rather than ‘imposing’ their own (Z 17). Such honouring minimally involves gentle and non-intrusive actions, but also has the active dimension attending and tending to the changing natures and needs of things, ‘fathom[ing] the real character of life’ (Z 19). In the case of animals, this means nurturing their distinctive capacities and dispositions, helping them ‘find [their] place in the flow’ of life amid the ‘ten thousand things’ (Z 3). Far from being aloof from animals and nature, the *zhēnrén* constantly acts to ‘nurture life’ by caring for birds and beasts and gently stewarding natural processes ‘opened up and arrayed’ by *Dào* (Z 6, 23). If done successfully, the spontaneously nurturing *zhēnrén* can ‘take joy’ in their experience of nature, alert to the ‘uncontrived inclinations of things’, ‘alive’ to their changing needs and helping them to ‘accomplish their own mandates’ (Z 6, 14, 26).

Given the attitudes and virtues characteristic of a Daoist sage, no wonder they have been called ‘the gardeners of the cosmos’. Attentiveness, gentleness, humility, spontaneity, and appreciative affection for birds, beasts, rivers, trees, and plants, their moral outlook will point them towards the intimacy of gardening rather than the grandiose ambitions of more modern environmental activism. Moreover, their spontaneous harmony with the rhythms of the natural world are congruent with their aesthetic activities: their receptivity to things and the joy they feel in ‘nurturing life’ inspired and guided their painting, poetry, and singing in a very direct way. We could say that the Confucian *literati* gardeners were not there to garden and all they needed from their garden was peace and quiet. By contrast, the Daoists saw the gardening as significant precisely because it was a way to cultivate nurturing care and the spontaneous comportment characteristic of one who ‘follows the Way of Heaven’. It would also naturally inspire the sort of artistic activities that mattered to them – ones expressive of their conviction that lived intimacy with the sights and sounds of nature is a component of a truly authentic human life.

I think Daoism is the superior example from the Chinese philosophical tradition of an intimate connection between gardens and gardening, virtue and flourishing, and what in the West we call the arts. The Confucians are reluctant gardeners for whom the edifying arts are best practiced within the world of human ritual and artifice, whereas the Daoists regarded a genuine engagement with nature as integral to a flourishing life. What we see in these cases are moral visions of the good life interacting with conceptions of the significance of gardens and gardens and the arts. Confucians saw only weak connections between gardens, the arts, and the good life. Daoists, however, saw gardens as perfect places for the spontaneous and authentic moral and aesthetic activities characteristic of those who ‘follow the Way’.

**Conclusions**

This chapter surveyed different accounts of the relationship between gardens, the arts, and the good life in the Chinese philosophical tradition. In Confucianism and Daoism we find the vision of gardens as arenas for edifying experiences and activities. The differences are that a Confucian sees gardens as contingently valuable locations for ways of life no longer feasible in the corrupted artifice of the public world and saw minimal edifying value in gardening as such. By contrast the Daoists experienced gardens as opportunities to cultivate spontaneous ways of life which necessarily includes care and nurturance of natural places and creatures with which one is intimately engaged. It also included capturing the joy and beauty of these activities in art and music and verse—all human ways that celebrate one’s harmony with the natural world and, therefore, with the Way.

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