



Portland Classical Chinese Garden The Five Elements: POETRY

Poetry is One of Five Elements in a Chinese Garden

In the Portland Classical Chinese Garden, there is poetry everywhere you look. Poetry is carved into rocks. Poetry graces both the inside and outside of the Garden's architecture. Some of the poetic inscriptions are only two or three Chinese characters (words) while many are longer two-line poems called couplets. Even the Chinese name of the Garden—*Lan Su Yuan*—has both a descriptive and a poetic meaning. On one hand, the name can be translated 'Portland Suzhou Garden.' On the other hand, the poetic name is based on homophones—different Chinese characters that also sound like "lan su yuan"—that translate as 'Orchid Awaken Garden' or more poetically as 'The Garden of Awakening Orchids.'

Poetry is one of the five elements used to create peace and harmony inside *Lan Su Yuan*. To the Chinese, plants and trees are the skin or clothing of the world, water is the circulatory system, rocks are the skeleton system of the world, architecture allows people to adapt to nature, and poetry connects the elements all together. In poetry, humans engage in the creative process to capture the balance and beauty of nature's wonders. For instance, a couplet inside the *Hall of Reflections in Clear Ripples* speaks in colors and patterns:

Shades of bamboo, layers of rock; dark is the pine's hue.
Slanted the path, crooked the stream: soft is the water's song.

Poems in the Past and the Present

For many hundreds of years, China's government officials would build their homes within the walls of a garden. As officials, their time was spent on politics and complex problems. As well-educated men, they had deep knowledge of China's long history of over 5,000 years. In their gardens, these scholar officials removed themselves from the business and busy-ness of the everyday world; they became poets and artists who could wander along the garden's twisting walkways to find inspiration from plants and flowers, ripples on fish ponds, breezes moving through bamboo, moonlight and shadows. As poets, they kept their five senses alert in the garden, bringing their sensitivity together with a deep knowledge of Chinese poetry and history. They could write poems while thinking about events of China's enduring past. Their poems would talk about the past and the present as if time could move forward and backward. For example, a grove of bamboo bending in the wind by the moon gate or a school of fish swimming under a rainbow bridge in clear water, could be contrasted with the timelessness of winter becoming spring or fruit ripening in the summer sun. In this way, the poet could describe, in rich detail, what was happening in the moment and discover nature's lessons that are forever hidden within the cycles of life.

Couplets: Poems of Two Lines

One form of poetry that has been used by garden poets for 2,000 years is a two-line poem that has special rules. This poem is known as a **couplet** and consists of two lines of verse that both have the same number of Chinese characters (words), have the same parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives,

adverbs) and are similar in meaning. Reading the first line of a couplet, requires a reader to engage in a process of solving the puzzle of how the two lines of poetry set up a balance of pairs that match in each line. For example, one line might talk about clouds and its opposite line would feature a mountain. Sand could be in one line, matched with waves in the other line of the couplet. Other contrasts or matches in a couplet might be: Wind-rain, walk-sit, hands-clothes, desert-river, emerald-azure (green-blue), aside-among, lazy-busy, worried-peaceful, suddenly-gradual, one-many. A couplet that can be found in the Portland Classical Chinese Garden demonstrates how two lines create a harmonious balance:

Myriad flowers dare to blossom in the snow
A single tree leads the world in greeting spring.
Couplet found in *Celestial Hall of Permeating Fragrance* (Scholar's Study) Lan Su Yuan

In this couplet, myriad (countless, numerous) flowers are paired with a single tree; the snow of winter and the bloom of spring create a balance between the changing of seasons. Can you identify the contrasts and comparisons found in the following couplets?

Birds sing, new fruit ripening;
Blossoms fall, old friends scarce.
Chang Yu (Poet of the Tang Dynasty 618-906 CE)

The water's sheen serves as my mirror;
The flowers' scent penetrates my garment.
Couplet found in *Moon-Locking Pavilion* in *Lan Su Yuan*

A Collage of Lines from the Past into the Present

Within the Chinese scholar's garden, two-line poems are most often found as vertical couplets on either side of an entryway or on two parallel pillars found inside or outside garden buildings. The couplet may arise from the poet's response to a mood produced by the changing landscape. Sometimes, a couplet may combine one original line by the poet with a line found in a couplet written hundreds of years earlier. Couplets may actually be written as a collage of lines, in which two matching lines—from two different poets—are fused together to form a new couplet referred to as a *jjù*. This "borrowing" of lines is not seen as copying another poet's work; it shows that the modern poet has deep knowledge of the Chinese tradition of poetry and literature. Other couplets started with poems from ancient times. Poets would sometimes play a guessing game with each other where one poet would say a line of a couplet that dated back 500 or more years; the other poet would have to recite the matching line to show how much they had learned about poetry or they had to make up a new line that would balance with the ancient couplet. Poets would earn each other's respect by remembering, reciting and re-creating traditional couplets into modern times or modern verse.

Engage in the conversation across time by completing these couplets:

Example: 1st line: Walk and reach the place where the stream ends
2nd line: Sit to watch the moment when clouds form. By Wang Wei

1st line: Birds have gone home, the sand holds their tracks
2nd line:

1st line: When the crane comes, the pine has company
2nd line: