

One Work

# Zheng Guogu's Liao Garden

(2000 – ongoing)

**Liao Garden is the sprawling garden and studio of Zheng Guogu, located in his native Yangjiang on the southeastern coast of China. The artist conceives of it as one massive work, with complex structures, including a golden pyramid, atrium, and even a Museum of the Wind. Inside the pyramid, Guogu treated Yujia Bian to a tea salvaged from the Qing era, and as they inhaled the leafy aroma, he spoke about the origins of his garden and where it's headed today.**

All images by Zheng Guogu



View of the pyramid at Liao Garden.

**Yujia Bian:** Let's talk about the formation of Liao Garden. How did it come about?

**Zheng Guogu:** In 2000, I was searching for a studio, but I wanted it to be a garden-style one, with different levels, and thousands of square metres in size. So, I started looking for one within the area around my home, which was part of the government's planned zone for buildings, or "San Tong Yi Ping", which means the ground had been levelled off and supplied with water, electricity, and roads. Later, I discovered orchards full of lychees, which made me think of this kind of sloped landscaping that should be reflected in the built structures as well as in the gardens. The idea is a bit like the gardens of the Imperial era that have both mountains and forests within them.

**YB** One can barely see the traces of the orchards today!

**ZG** Yes, many people ask me where the fruit trees are. I planted some more, mixed with century-old ones, and cotton trees, Buddhist pines, and other pine trees. There are also larger ones, and ones which I cannot name. There are also Queen crape myrtle trees.

**YB** In a way, you turned this lychee orchard into a garden. What would you say is the difference between the two?

**ZG** A garden imitates the diversity of plants in the wild, on an artificial level. Plant species are diverse in nature, not homogenous – one need only look at the ecology of nature. It has diversity with competition and pollination across species. If you see an orchard, it has to be artificial, the opposite of variegated. So I diversified the plant life in Liao Garden to recover that mixture of species, and now it has the look of a garden.

**YB** Initially the garden was called "Age of Empires". What's its relationship to Liao Garden?

**ZG** Back then I was playing a video game called *Age of Empires*. I liked the game because one can expand territories in it. Starting from peasantry and farming, then slowly you have an army or a castle. Eventually, when your strength reaches a certain point, you can build something called a "Wonder of the World". There are different monuments from global histories of different nations in *Age of Empires*.





Interior view from the People's Assembly Hall.

That is to say, if it is Egypt, it is a pyramid; if it is China, it may be the Temple of Heaven. I thought I could realise these virtual things in reality. Just like Pop art, it's okay to borrow from what is common knowledge. There were about eighty million people playing *Age of Empires* in China at that time, so I thought to import the game's elements into the idea of the Chinese garden, but not the kind of Ming and Qing, or Suzhou gardens, or later the Li Garden in Kaiping, Guangdong, but a contemporary one. So we made a garden of *this* era.

**YB** We can see different Japanese rock gardens or Chinese classical gardens in Liao Garden. This pyramid we're sitting in could be reminiscent of the Kinkakuji Temple in Japan. Have you considered how these different cultural layers are combined when you were making Liao Garden?

**ZG** This pyramid can be created in *Age of Empires*. I wanted to have it completely empty inside. How do you construct with steel? If you have a span of ten metres inside, you need a Chinese construction that has a lot of beams; it is too complicated for *dougong*, the traditional wooden bracket system. But I also have a lot of non-structural elements made of wood, which make steel elements and wood work together. I also used water under the pyramid to create reflections, as there was actually water around the pyramids in Egypt that

created a mirror image (literally, not in the psychoanalytical sense). And a pyramid should be six-dimensional, but why? That is a practical decision, because it is one of the most basic patterns you can draw. The invisible net that connects us to the universe is like a honeycomb. Did you know that there are more than six senses? The sound of the universe is also a buzzing sound. Isn't it the sound of bees, too? Yes, so you see in many religions, it will ask you to pronounce "Om". "Om" is the most mysterious voice of the universe.

**YB** And there is the Museum of the Wind, and some other architectural and landscape features . . .

**ZG** The Museum of the Wind is actually a series of open layers connected by staircases, but it was originally supposed to be an art museum. We needed to do projects that are culture-related to be legalised by the local government. So we proposed to make a museum. But we had nothing to exhibit! Hence we have a museum composed solely of levels, pathways, and stairs. The experience of being in the museum differs dramatically from floor to floor in the way in which one feels the combination of the body and the wind blowing in from the mountains. The museum only exhibits the wind, which is different every day. There are exhibitions if there is wind, and there are none if there is no wind. That's the concept.



Rooftop view of the main architectural complex. The Museum of the Wind can be seen in the distance.

Once I saw an Indian yoga centre in the form of a circle. All yoga centres in India are round, and because the central complex where I work and meet with guests had a roof, I decided to cut a circle about twelve metres in diameter out of it, and I then created a garden in the atrium that would normally be outside, replete with flowing water. The life of flowing water is in concert with the heart. That is to say, when you go to the central building, you hear the sound of flowing water; in fact, you see the sound of flowing water outside. Your heart is full of fluid, which also flows out of you like water. There is also a Frangipani garden, which is a plant that is rarely seen in Chinese gardens. There is also a landscape feature called *tianchi*, whose contours are curved like terraced fields, and each layer has water like a pool, and there are over a dozen layers.

**YB** It feels as if you have created Liao Garden as your particular kind of world or universe. Can we understand it in this way?

**ZG** The scope of Liao Garden is pretty much like those of Chinese private gardens of the past. For example, the Classical Suzhou gardens encircle plants seen outside the gardens, in nature. This means you are inside, and couldn't care less about the outside. One should keep the spirit of tradition, not to lose the spirit of the garden. And just like a person, the connection with the

sky should not be severed, though many landscape architects fail to take sight of this fact – whether there is indeed a connection, or if it is broken. This is the most important thing to consider if you want to maintain a relationship with the law of the universe.

**YB** Do you see your mode of working as something also affected by plants?

**ZG** It should be the whole environment that's affecting you, and the land is always of the present; a plant's consciousness is more sensitive than that of humans. I think consciousness is nonselective. When it came to earth, s/he found animals, plants, and some stones. Consciousness can also be thought of as a "unity", the total value of consciousness, right? It should let some individual consciousnesses collect information, and then return to the unity, now more aware. Just like in the field of art, there are many individuals who are creating, or discovering, and then returning to society, or the art world, with their findings. I think that unity is a kind of black hole. It's a way of coming back.

*ZHENG GUOGU is an artist living in Yangjiang, China.*

*YUJIA BIAN is a researcher and writer living in Guangzhou, and translated this conversation from Chinese.*