

A Study of Hongzhi Garden at the Qing Dynasty Taiwan Prefecture Office

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Abstract

Yamen gardens (or “government office gardens”) were gardens constructed near or within the government offices mainly for the use of officialdom and originally used mostly for the leisure purposes of officials during their term in office. However, due to the fact that it was mostly local officials and the gentry who advocated, repaired and used and met at these gardens, the social leisure activities and receptions held there sometimes involved those in public affairs. Therefore, although not official government establishments per se, they became an important site for social interaction by the government and very much different from private gardens. Government offices and gardens can be considered as together forming the binary spaces of officialdom and reclusion.

Soon after the Qing conquest of Taiwan, the construction of government spaces such as administration offices and military facilities were the priority of the new rulers. For this reason, the repair of old buildings from the previous administration coincided with the building of new facilities as needed. By the middle of the eighteenth century, building activities among government officials saw an upsurge of gardens for leisure and social activities, and the “Hongzhi (Goose Tracks) Garden” of the Taiwan prefectural government is a representative example of such. The Taiwan Prefecture government building as one of the official centers in Taiwan had undergone numerous repairs and expansions over the years to reach its final appearance, the old sprawling banyan tree next to the building with the Sihe (“Four Harmonies”) Pavilion there becoming a scenic attraction known as “Four Harmonies and Immortal (Banyan) Beams.” Furthermore, Taiwan Prefect Jiang Yunxun in 1765 turned it into a complete setting for the “Four Harmonies and Immortal Beams,” the neat and orderly layout known as Hongzhi Garden. Based on the spatial context in the illustration and record of Hongzhi Garden that he did, we see how this patron behind the building of the garden was inspired by the idiom “A goose’s footprints in the snow” to express his ideas on vestiges of the past and the fleeting nature of life, thereby also to avoid overemphasizing its leisure aspect and give it more profound meaning.

After Hongzhi Garden was constructed, it became an important banquet site for government officials and the local gentry. Many sentiments and personal feelings in works of literature were written on the subject of this site, resulting in authors writing prefaces about it as well. As a complete construct and being close to government offices, it also served official uses for dormitory and office facilities as well as temporary departments. Although these needs were contrary to the original spirit of the garden, it offers a glimpse at even more diverse facets of the government office garden. Later, with another change of government, Hongzhi Garden was abandoned and became a military facility. However, because the Taiwan Prefecture building inherited from the subprefectural offices of the Zhengs before the Qing conquest and was consciously associated by literati in the twentieth century with the plum blossoms at the Koxinga Shrine, it became a case of mistaken identity that nonetheless had the effect indeed of “a goose’s footprints in the snow” to commemorate vestiges of the past and about the fleeting nature of life. As an example of observing the changes in spaces for the seat of Qing dynasty rule in Taiwan, it shows that the nature of space has not remained the same. Changes and different uses constantly evolve over time, always imparting new meaning to spaces.

Keywords: Tianxing subprefecture office, Four Harmonies and Immortal Beams, Jiang Yunxun, old plum trees, spatial context

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)