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Korean Gardens outside of Korea: The Re-Construction of National Cultural Identity

Introduction

On 31 March 2006, the Korean Garden (fig. 1), called the Seouler Garten (Seoul Garden), was opened in the Gardens of the World, a public park in Berlin. The garden was a gift from the city of Seoul to the city of Berlin as part of their city partnership agreement.

It was handed over a few months after the end of Asia Pacific Week 2005, a biennial economic dialogue forum in Berlin, when South Korea was the country in focus. As one of only two Korean gardens in Germany, the Seouler Garten is one of the few places where South Korea officially presents itself in Germany.¹



Fig. 1 The entrance gate of the Seouler Garten; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

The Dongnakdang garden in Gyeongju

The model for the garden in Berlin to a large extent is the Joseon period (1392-1910) Dongnakdang “House of Solitary Enjoyment”, a sixteenth-century garden and the former retreat of Neo-Confucian philosopher and writer Yi Eon-jeok (1491-1553) (fig. 2). It is located in Gyeongju, the Silla era (57 BC-935 AD) capital of Korea in the Southeast of the peninsula. It can be classified in the category of “rural gardens” (*byeolseo-jeongwon*).² These were private gardens, essentially a house or property with a green area, the majority built by former court officials – mostly Neo-Confucian scholars, who were tired of politics – to enjoy after

their official retirement. The complex construction and nested structure of the Dongnakdang garden are typical of Joseon period upper class estates and accentuate the characteristics of traditional Korean architecture. In contrast to Western architecture, where the focus is primarily on geometric forms, traditional Korean architecture strives for harmony between architectural elements and sensual experiences according to the principle of wholeness.



Fig. 2 The entrance of the Dongnakdang garden; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

These correspond with each other and form an aesthetic unit. It is not only about a purely visual experience, but also about an experience that can, if possible, be absorbed with all the senses. The sound of the leaves in the wind can be amplified by the echo of the walls surrounding an estate; pavilions are located above watercourses and invite people to linger while listening to the sound of the water. The outer form interacts with its environment, which characterises it, and, as in nature, it is subordinated to a higher goal according to the doctrine of *pungsu* (geomancy).³ The space-time component also plays an important role here. Thus, the visitor does not reach the central buildings of the gardens and properties directly, but via nested paths and courtyards. The intention is to enable people to better

absorb and enjoy the atmosphere created by architecture and to experience themselves in it.⁴

The Dongnakdang has a large entrance gate, indicating the high social status of the former landlord. Behind the gate are various buildings, such as storage facilities, living rooms, bedrooms and accommodation for the staff. Each of the buildings is connected to an open courtyard. The many winding narrow paths act as links for these individual areas. The heart of the complex is a pavilion on a rocky promontory at the back, from where you can see a small stream (fig. 3). This pavilion was the study room of the scholar Yi Eon-jeok. It faces East, since the orientation to the East is considered the most pleasant in Korea. Here, it is neither too hot in summer, nor too cold in winter. The arrangement of traditional Korean properties and houses into several areas and buildings results from the Neo-Confucian socio-political hierarchical system. According to the Neo-Confucian ideology prevailing in Korea, men and women lived in separate residential areas.⁵ Moreover, there was a hierarchy within families, which distinguished between old and young, deceased and living. This strict social structure also played an important role in the design of gardens and estates.⁶



Fig. 3 The pavilion in the Dongnakdang and the river below; 2016; photo Maria Sobotka.

The Seouler Garten in Berlin

At first glance, the Seouler Garten in Berlin seems to follow the structure and style of the Dongnakdang, although on a smaller scale. The Seouler Garten can be reached via a gate in the entrance area, similar to the one in Gyeongju. The garden has four open courtyards, one building and several smaller garden

areas (fig. 4).

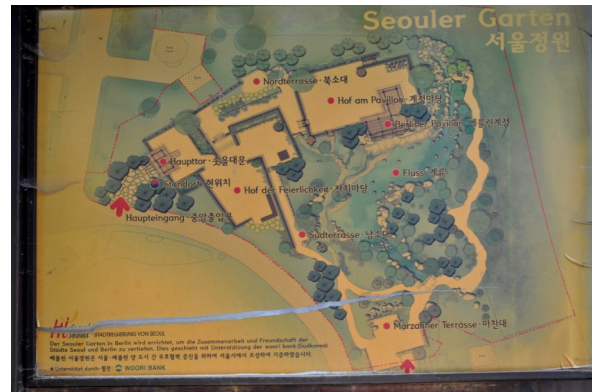


Fig.4 General plan of the Seouler Garten in Berlin-Marzahn; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

The nested composition of these areas is achieved through the many paths and wooden passage doors, which create proximity and connection between the otherwise separated rooms. The heart and centerpiece of the Seouler Garten is also a pavilion, the so-called Berlin Pavilion (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Back of the Berlin Pavilion; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

Its significance is highlighted by its location at the rear. The detached, elevated building is located on a plateau of rock-like stones stacked on top of each other; a small watercourse extends at its foot.

Following its Korean model, the Souler Garten is surrounded by a clay wall, which suggests privacy and seclusion (fig. 6). Thus, the garden as a private space is emphasised.

In addition to the vegetation that originally covered the open space of the Souler Garten and is still growing there in parts, there are many plants and trees that have been brought to Germany from Korea. The combination of native plants from Korea, such as pines, fan maples, bamboos, plums, shrub pentecosts, Japanese elms, Japanese swamp irises, chrysanthemums, to only name a few, characterises the atmosphere of the Souler Garten in a special way.⁷



Fig. 6 Clay walls in the Souler Garten; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

The construction of the Dongnakdang and that of the Souler Garten undoubtedly bear similarities in

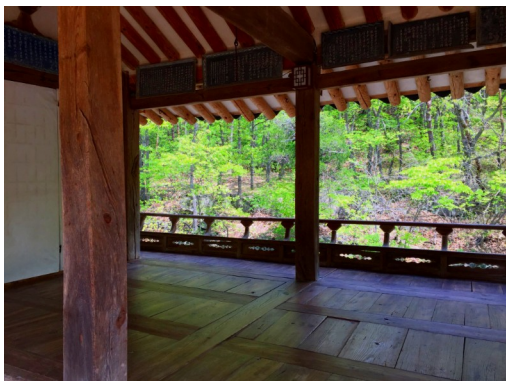


Fig. 7a Interior view of the pavilion in the Dongnakdang; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

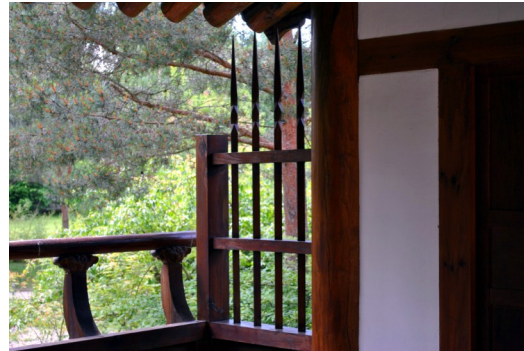


Fig. 7b Interior view of the Berlin Pavilion in the Souler Garten; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

style and concept (figs. 7a, 7b), in architectural details⁸ and in decorative motifs. Individual features in the garden were moved in exact correspondence from Gyeongju to Berlin (fig. 8).

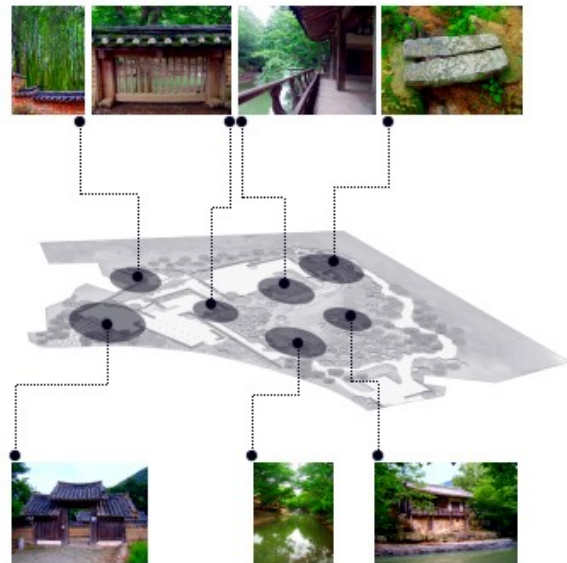


Fig. 8 Individual elements of the Dongnakdang are positioned one-to-one in the Souler Garten in Berlin-Marzahn; © planning documents of the Seoul Metropolitan Government.

Nevertheless, the Souler Garten contains a number of elements that are neither typical for Joseon period gardens, nor present in the Dongnakdang. The most obvious examples of this are the many stone (fig. 9) and wooden figures (fig. 10) scattered across the garden. These guardian figures originate from

Korean folk belief and in Korea are set up at the entrance and the end of villages, towns or temples to protect people. In Berlin, these various figures are scattered across the garden, and grouped together in a category on the information boards.⁹ In addition, the Souler Garten contains numerous features from everyday life during the Joseon period, such as the hand mill, water tank, fountain and *jangdokdae* (a place where fermented foods, such as *kimchi*, soy sauce or soy paste were stored in large clay pots). There is also a *jangdokdae* in the Dongnakdang, which is used by the family living on the estate today, although it is unclear whether this was part of the original estate of Yi Eon-jeok. The Souler Garten shows the visitor a series of religious objects, such as a fish-shaped wind chime hanging from one of the wooden doors, which in Korea is usually found in temples, and two stone pagodas.



Fig. 9 Pair of stone figures in the entrance area of the Souler Garten; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.



Fig. 10 Wooden figures in the Souler Garten; 2016; photo: Maria Sobotka.

The planning and conceptualisation of a Korean garden in Germany

The points described raise the question of which concept underlies the Souler Garten in Berlin and why the Seoul Metropolitan Government opted for this concept. During a research stay in Seoul in 2016, I had the opportunity to get to know the team of the Seoul Metropolitan Government that was responsible for planning the garden. They generously provided me with all the planning documents and contracts related to horticulture for my work. The facts listed below are based on my evaluation of these documents.

The Souler Garten is the result of two political agreements between the two former mayors of Seoul and Berlin, Lee Myung-bak and Klaus Wowereit. The first agreement was signed when Lee Myung-bak visited Berlin during Asia-Pacific Week in the autumn of 2003. Initial ideas and suggestions for cultural exchange between South Korea and Germany were discussed. The second, more concrete, agreement dates from the spring of 2005, and concerns plans for the partnership and the implementation of a Korean garden in Berlin and a German square in Seoul. Both places, it is stated in the agreement, must bear the name of the other city in their name. Thus, the Korean garden in Berlin is named the Souler Garten, and the free space in the centre of Seoul designed by the city of Berlin is named Berliner Platz. In addition to original parts of the Berlin Wall, the Berliner Platz features a figure of the Berlin bear, the heraldic animal of the German capital, and a traditional German street lamp. The parts of the wall symbolise the reunification of Germany and the hope for a peaceful settlement of the conflict between North and South Korea. The construction of the Souler Garten therefore includes a cultural-political function that should not be underestimated.

The planning documents reveal the concept of the Souler Garten in Berlin as a meeting place for Germans and Koreans. The intention of the garden, nicknamed Garden of Joy in Harmony with Nature, is to convey Korean culture and values to German visitors with the aim of deepening the relationship between the two countries. The demarcation from other countries and their (garden) cultures, especially the demarcation from China and Japan, is a special

concern. Indeed, for the Korean side, this is one of the most important points in the concept due to the Korean garden's geographic proximity to the other gardens of the park. The intention of the Seoul Metropolitan Government from the very beginning was to create a garden that was completely different from the Chinese and Japanese gardens in Berlin. To show the peculiarity of Korean culture through the Souler Garten was the highest priority. In a document by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, for example, the characteristics of Chinese, Japanese and Korean gardens are compared in a table. According to the latter, nature in China is generally presented as large and powerful, the Chinese garden being the reflection of a fantastic and monumental landscape in which the human being must integrate her- or himself. Japanese gardens on the other hand show nature in an abstract way, *en miniature*. In order to distinguish the Korean garden from the other two East Asian gardens, the Souler Garten in Berlin was to focus on the harmony between man and nature, emphasising the idea of a holistic approach and naturalness. Not only should contemplation be made possible, but the garden should function as a space that can actually be experienced, representing the very ideals of Korean scholars. According to the table, in terms of visual attributes, the Chinese garden is symbolised by water and moon, and the Japanese garden by mountains and water. Smaller rocks with a watercourse were declared typical for Korean gardens.

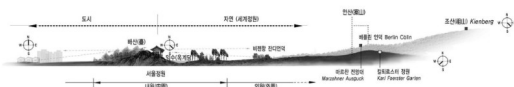


Fig. 11 Representation of the Souler Garten and its surroundings from the point of view of Korean harmony *pungsu*, © planning documents of the Seoul Metropolitan Government.

Ultimately, the decision to choose the Dongnagdang garden as a model for the garden in Berlin was primarily due to the natural geographic conditions in Berlin – the effort required to construct a small artificial plateau for the pavilion on the flat property was relatively small compared to the other

alternatives. The design of the garden takes into account Korean geomantic ideas, *pungsu*: the Souler Garten was designed with Berlin's Kienberg mountain in the background and the front of the garden facing South (fig. 11). The pavilion faces East, and it is no coincidence that a river (the Wuhle) flows nearby. The idea is a holistic concept that is in harmony with nature and a space in which the visitor can retreat and enjoy nature. Cultural activities and events in the Souler Garten, such as Korean tea ceremonies, are also designed to follow this concept.

Endnotes

1. The other Korean garden is located in the Grüneburgpark in Frankfurt am Main. The garden was a gift from South Korea to the city of Frankfurt am Main and was presented in 2005 at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where South Korea was the country of focus. See https://www.frankfurt.de/sixcms/detail.php?id=2793&ffmpar%5B_id_inhalt%5D=1341294,09-03-2019.
2. For an overview and classification of traditional gardens of the Joseon period, see Korea National Arboretum, *Hanguui jeontongjeongwon. Joseonsidae daepyojeogin jeontongjeongwoneul jungsimeuro* (Representative Gardens of the Joseon period), Seoul 2012.
3. *Pungsu* is the Korean word for geomancy. It can be literally translated as 'wind-water'. The Chinese word for geomantics is *fengshui*. Geomancy is practiced in different ways in East Asia. For this reason, the uniform use of the term *fengshui*, which is more common in Europe, can be misleading. Therefore, the neutral umbrella term geomancy or the word used in the respective country is preferred, see Yoon Hong-key, *The Culture of Fengshui in Korea. An Exploration of East Asian Geomancy*, Plymouth 2006, p. 3.
4. Maria Sobotka, *Schönheit im Einklang mit der Natur: Von Theorien zur koreanischen Ästhetik bis hin zu sozialwissenschaftlichen Aspekten des Themas Schönheit im modernen Südkorea*, in: Uri Korea. *Kunsthistorische und Ethnografische Beiträge zur Ausstellung. Ausstellungskatalog*, eds. Susanne Knödel und Bernd Schmelz, Mitteilungen des Museums für Völkerkunde Hamburg, vol. 50, 2017, p. 110-131.
5. The law of gender segregation prohibited direct and permanent contact between men and women in the strongly patriarchal society of the Joseon period (1392-1910). Women were only allowed to maintain contact with male relatives from the third degree of kinship onwards, see Park In-won, *Paradoxie des Verlangens: Liebesdiskurse in deutschsprachigen und koreanische Prosatexten*, Cologne 2010, p. 67.
6. On the construction and structure of Joseon-era houses, see The Korean Institute of Traditional Landscape Architecture, *Korean Traditional Landscape Architecture*, New Jersey 2007.
7. During the time Japan annexed Korea (1910-1945), Koreans not only had to change their own names to Japanese names, but many Korean words also had to give way to Japanese terms. Around 2,500 plants and trees were renamed. In 2015, about 70 years after the liberation of Korea, The Korea Forest Service decided to replace the colonial Japanese names of plants and trees with their original Korean names. In other languages, such as German and English, the Japanese names have established themselves. See Jhoo Dong-chan, *Korea's native plants to find new names*, in: Korea Times, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/08/116_184631.html, 10-03-2019.
8. In particular, the pavilion, including its small details, was reconstructed almost one-to-one in Berlin, as seen in the parallels of the wooden railings with air holes in the form of abstract flowers (*punghyeol*) or the lotus flower-shaped supports (*hayeop*) attached to the ends of the railing's webs. Further details, such as the brick tiles (*sumaksae*) at the end of the clay

- walls or the entrance gate, or the choice of materials for the same, also prove to be faithful replicas.
9. For example, the National Folk Museum in Seoul and the Korea Stone Art Museum distinguish between at least three different categories of such figures as well as a multitude of subcategories, see Min Sang-ah, *Yeomweoni damgin dol, uriyerdolbangmulguan*, in: Hangukzheontongmunhwahagbo, 2 March 2000, p. 7.
 10. For example, the National Folk Museum in Seoul and the Korea Stone Art Museum distinguish between at least three different categories of such figures as well as a multitude of subcategories, see Min Sang-ah, *Yeomweoni damgin dol, uriyerdolbangmulguan*, in: Hangukzheontongmunhwahagbo, 2 March 2000, p. 7.
 11. See Maria Sobotka, *The Korean Garden in the Gardens of the World - "Re"-Presentation of a Korean Garden in the West*. Thesis for the Master of Arts at the Freie Universität zu Berlin, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Department of East Asian Art History, April 2017, chapter 3, p. 57-65.
 12. The word *othering* is a word creation that transforms the English noun or adjective "other" by means of the suffix -ing. It is usually translated in German as "Veränderung" or "Fremdmachung" and describes the active distancing or differentiation of an individual or a group from other groups or individuals. The idea of *othering* can already be found in Hegel's work, who deals with the question of how self-perception is connected with construction and differentiation from others. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the term "othering" when examining *othering* in connection with discourses of power in colonial times and thus describes the process by which the colonial discourse creates otherness. See Mariam Popal, *Heine and the Orient? Between Subjectivity and Change or How the Other Came to Germany - Saw - and - ?*, in: *Strangers, Enemies and Curiosities. Inside and Outside Views of Our Muslim Neighbor*, eds. Benjamin Jokisch et al., Berlin / New York 2009, p. 67.
 13. The definition is based on Robert Hauser, who uses the approaches of Carl F. Graumann and the cultural concept of Karl P. Hansen to specify the two concepts of identity and culture, see Robert Hauser, *Cultural Identity in a Globalized World*, in: *Netzbasierete Kommunikation, Identität und Gemeinschaft*, eds. Andreas Metzner-Szigeth und Nicanor Ursua, Berlin 2006, p. 315-33.
 14. Christian Tagsold, *Japanische Gärten als Räume des Anderen*, in: *Fremdbilder – Selbstbilder. Paradigmen japanisch-deutscher Wahrnehmung (1861-2011)*, ed. Stephan Köhn, Wiesbaden 2013, p. 186.
 15. See Senatsverwaltung für Stadt und Umwelt, 2006. Stadtentwicklung Berlin: http://www.berlin.de/senuvk/umwelt/stadtgruen/gruenanlagen/de/gruenanlagen_plaetze/marzhahn/gaerten_der_welt/koreagarten.shtml, 10-03-2019.

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Summary

This paper explores the representation of Neo-Confucian literati gardens of the Korean Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) in the West by taking as its focus

the sixteenth-century Korean scholar garden Dongnakdang (House of Solitary Enjoyment) and a contemporary Korean garden in Berlin, the so-called Seouler Garten [Seoul Garden]. To a great extent, the Dongnakdang served as a model for the Seouler Garten, which is located in the Gardens of the World, a public park in Berlin. Built in 2005, it was presented by the Seoul Metropolitan Government to the city of Berlin in 2006 as a gift in the context of their city partnership. As one of only two Korean gardens in Germany, it is one of the few places where South Korea officially presents its country and culture, and is therefore worthy of examination. Focusing on these two gardens, I explore the literati garden concept of the Dongnakdang, and then show, how this traditional concept has been transferred into a modern Western context. Based on the theoretical concept of *othering* I elucidate how the imagination and representation of Korean culture shape the picture of Korean gardens in the West. Moreover, these findings can help to understand how notions of cultural identity emerge. Based on an extensive visitor survey in the Gardens of the World and a detailed analysis of the Seouler Garten, I not only address the predominant image of South Korean gardens in Germany today, but also investigate whether this garden in Berlin can be seen as a successful “translation” of a Neo-Confucian literati garden into a Western country.

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Maria Sobotka has held doctoral fellowships at the Peking University and Free University Berlin. With an academic background in art history, her research interest is on global art history, especially Chinese and Korean art, art market studies and cultural policy issues. Professional experience includes working on exhibitions for the German Historical Museum, National Folk Museum Korea, Ethnological Museum Hamburg, Neues Museum Berlin and the Kunsthistorisches-Institut in Florence, where she was part of the research group ‘Objects in the Contact Zone. The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things.’ Currently, she is assistant curator in the East Asian Department of the Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg.

Title

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