

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

Travel fellowship report:

Lessons from the Beijing Olympic landscape

When London won the right to hold the 2012 Olympic Games the British horticultural industry rejoiced. The Games provided the opportunity to construct a world class landscape that would require significant numbers of plants from an industry that had seen falling demand over a number of years. But more than this, we hoped it would become a showcase of the very best the industry could produce and act as a spring board from which landscaping and environmental sustainability might leap forward.

It didn't take long for the initial euphoria to die down and for concerns of the industry's ability to deliver to set in. The horticultural industry differs from most other in one startling dimension: plants cannot be produced overnight. As a result nurserymen struggle to know what to produce - fashions, demand and supply might well change between propagating a plant and that plant becoming ready for sale (some trees will take more than 25 years or more to grow). This fact affects many things, not least the way in which businesses react to market forces.

Nurserymen are inevitably conscious of the significant stock values they have sitting outside their office windows and of the possibility it might not sell before it perishes. This all too often leads to price wars that result in plants selling for below their production cost and landscape contractors have learned that prices can be frequently be negotiated down to unreasonable levels.

For these and other reasons the industry has become somewhat unusual! Within the industry there is all too often a willingness to 'engineer down' a scheme in order that cost savings can be delivered – whether or not those cost savings are looked for by the client. In other words, all too often a project might be well designed, well specified and even well funded, but the industry conspires to deliver a lesser scheme at a lower than budgeted cost.

It was against this background that I applied to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust to travel to Beijing and investigate the way in which the Olympic landscape for the 2008 games has been delivered. I had heard that in Beijing an Olympic park of vast proportions had been built, where unprecedented volumes of plants were being used and where the project design was to be of a world class standard. I wanted to know what measures the Chinese had taken to ensure that plants would be available in such quantities within such a comparatively short time. I was also interested to discover how the various professions of landscape architect, landscape contractor and nurserymen were arranged to ensure the level of communication that is needed if a scheme of this kind is to be successfully implemented.

The metrological and political climates of Beijing and London are clearly different in many ways but the issues to be overcome in delivering a world class landscape in just 7 years from inception are common to both. I hoped to spend six weeks in China

understanding how the Beijing Olympic Park was put together and learning lessons that would help London establish a world beating Olympic landscape.

Preparation

When I first conceived the idea of a visit to Beijing I had no contacts there whatsoever. Before I submitted my application to WCMT I established that if I was to be successful I would need to visit as many of the Beijing venue sites as possible and speak with contractors, architects and nurserymen. I would also need to develop an appreciation of how the London Games were being organised and where the similarities and differences might be with the Beijing Games by visiting the delivery agencies in both London and Beijing. Instinctively I felt that these various categories of visits or interviews would be relatively easy to achieve, with the single exception of the Beijing organisers. I set about contacting anyone I could think of who might have contacts in China to develop some sort of address book of useful names and contacts and was pleasantly surprised at how quickly this developed.

By the time I attended the selection interview in London in February 2007 I had developed a reasonably detailed plan of how I might proceed if I was fortunate enough to be offered a Fellowship. My principal contact in Beijing was a Chinese citizen named Renyuan who held a position of responsibility in the Beijing Botanical Gardens and who had once worked on an English nursery. Renyuan seemed to have meaningful contacts throughout the Chinese horticultural industry and assured me that he would be able to help arrange visits and interviews. I also re-kindled an old friendship with two Chinese former students from Staffordshire University, where I had once given a lecture on marketing in Horticulture. I knew that 'Spring' and 'Lee' both lived in the city of Shenyang in Liaoning province and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that their city would host a small part of the Games in a football stadium that was being constructed for the purpose, again I was assured that it would be possible to visit the site and to meet with some of the professionals who had been involved in the project.

My drive to work takes me past Harper Adams Agricultural College each day and I was aware that the college regularly takes students from China. Discussions with a number of the College lectures quickly established that there is a loose link between Harper Adams and some of the Beijing Universities. I also found that Staffordshire University has developed similar links and so I explored the possibility of making contact with a University college in Beijing and using students as interpreters.

For me, one of the most appealing aspects of a travel fellowship to China would be the total contrast in cultures between East and West – I like the opportunity to be taken out of familiar surroundings! But in China I would have no knowledge of the written or spoken language, no knowledge of social etiquette and protocol and yet I would be expected to build meaningful relationships and gather information – clearly a good interpreter would be vital.

In a meeting with an acquaintance and the Chinese manager of his office in Beijing I learned something of the pitfalls that can cause westerners difficulties in China and was introduced to the importance of 'Guanxi' translated vaguely as 'relationships'.

My friend advised me strongly that I would need a professional interpreter if I was to avoid making social blunders and he even recommended one. But I would need someone by my side for a significant part of my six weeks planned in China, a professional would eat into my budget and so I reserved judgment and kept both options open – I hoped to have a professional interpreter to draw on if necessary and a supply of students to help when that option seemed viable.

By February 2007, when I heard that I had been awarded a Fellowship, I was pleased that these various tentative contacts were in place and I felt confident that I would be able to build an effective itinerary to have in place when I arrived in Beijing in early May. The job of developing my contacts further was significantly helped by the fact that my Chinese contact at Beijing Botanic Gardens wanted to arrange for a number of his colleagues to visit Europe – the rules of Guanxi suddenly made me a contact he wanted to nurture! A flurry of emails quickly sorted out a hotel to stay at close to the Beijing Botanic Gardens and established Renyuan as my main contact in China.

However, no matter how hard I tried I seemed to be unable to get beyond a rough outline of what I would be doing when I got to Beijing. With the benefit of hindsight I think this reveals something of the Chinese nature – establishing a relationship is very important and must be done before a job is carried out. I know this now, but when I took my seat on a flight to China I had mixed feelings – a part of me revelled in the fact that I was going off into the unknown with very little by way of concrete plans, another part of me worried that those plans might never actually become concrete!

Beijing – Preparing the ground

I got to my hotel in Beijing around one o'clock on a Sunday morning, tired after a very long journey but pleased to discover that a forty minute taxi ride from the Airport had cost no more than a few pounds – it seemed people had been right to advise me that I would be able to move about the city by taxi without blowing my budget in the first couple of days. I deliberately took the trouble to stop outside the hotel, and again in the foyer, to take in my first impression of the Hotel I hoped would become home for a few weeks, and I was very pleased with what I saw. The Fragrant Hill hotel is described as providing both western and oriental cuisine and comfort, yet as a Westerner I was not able to book a room there myself – Renyuan booked for me. In my whole stay I saw very few westerners and my first impression – that it felt like a very oriental hotel dressed in faintly western clothing – proved about right. The place suited me down to the ground, I suspect I became a bit of a celebrity, occasionally trying out a few words of very poor Chinese, always rewarded with giggles.

Once I had registered at the reception and been given a key (and assigned one of several bell boys to carry my bags for me) I was surprised to be given a message, telling me that Renyuan would pick me up at 8 the following morning! This was good news, as it reassured me that I might make some progress after all, but it did scupper my hopes of a lie in and a Sunday to myself to recover.

The next day, after my first breakfast on Chinese soil (I took the Chinese option and enjoyed it) I met Renyuan and a young lady called Wei Yu – a member of the Botanic

Garden staff – and we set off to the Botanic Gardens. By about noon we had drafted out my first two weeks of itinerary. Ideas had been discussed, important people had been identified and phoned (on a Sunday) and visits and appointments had been arranged. I was staggered to see the power of Guanxi in action and impressed to realise that, in Renyuan, I had fallen upon a master in the art. We were joined by three students I had managed to make contact with from the Beijing Forestry University, who Renyuan had asked over so that my interpreter requirements could be arranged. Two of these girls were studying Landscape Architecture, the other Tourism, and they agreed to ask any of their colleagues interested in helping me to meet with me the following evening at the University. This meeting went ahead, and left me with a small group I could call upon by email if at any time I needed their services. All were girls, and I generally used them in pairs to ensure they felt safe.

My ‘Girls’ turned out to be so good that I never did make use of the professional interpreter I had been introduced to. Every visit I made was arranged by someone able to draw on ‘Guanxi’ and I suspect I borrowed a degree of authority from those people. The students were all very well educated and could provide me with a wealth of background as we travelled about the city and countryside. They were generally very concerned that I should not be extravagant and as a result they lured me away from taxis and onto the new Beijing Metro system (where I soon became comfortable enough to travel on my own), into electric tricycle-taxis and they gave me the confidence to eat in some places I would never have dared go on my own. My debt to the students who helped me out is very great indeed.

I also came to rely upon Wei Yu, the other member of the Beijing botanic Garden team who joined me on my first day in China. Yu was responsible for the maintenance of the gardens with a particular interest in herbaceous plants and she was assigned to me as a point of call if I found myself needing help. Yu was a part of the delegation planning to go to Europe at the end of my second week and it eventually transpired that she hoped to work in an RHS garden in the UK. On my first day in China it was obvious that Renyuan and Yu could make my visit a success, it was just as clear that they needed help in putting the detail to their visit to the UK and I was very happy to offer to do what I could to help them. Indeed, this seems to be the essence of ‘Guanxi’.

Gathering facts in Beijing

By the end of my first day in China I had an itinerary that made use of all but one day of my first two weeks in the city. I decided that this was enough to be going on with – I would take stock in a little while and plan the remainder of my visit when things started to take shape.

My first two weeks were very busy indeed: I had visits planned to Landscape Architects, Contractors and Nurserymen. I also had promises of (illicit) visits to a number of the Olympic sites and ‘recreational’ visits to well known parks and gardens in Beijing. Nor would my evenings be my own – I had been warned that food plays a big part in Chinese life and I found that many of the people I met would ask me to eat with them in the evening. If my ‘hosts’ at the Botanic Gardens discovered that I was free for an evening they seemed compelled to drag me out – never to the same

restaurant twice – and feed me to bursting. Amongst all this I had also pledged to help Renyuan organise his trip to the UK and I somehow accepted an invitation to give a lecture to students at the University on the differences between European and Chinese horticulture. If I was jet-lagged I never had the time to notice.

Horticulture in Beijing

I had hoped to discover that Beijing had found solutions to some of the problems that London will face in delivering a world class Olympic landscape, such as the problem of ensuring that the plants designers specify are available in the size and quantity required from the nurseries that must grow them. I am convinced that we can only do this in London by developing a dialog between growers and landscape architects, I also believe that such a dialog can only benefit the industry – indeed, my hope is that, for the horticultural industry, an improved ongoing dialog might be the most valuable ‘legacy’ of the London Games. I hoped to find that this had happened in Beijing but I quickly discovered that the differences of climate, culture and politics created an environment where some comparisons can not be made.

I became reasonably familiar with Beijing Botanic Gardens and it was here that I first came to realise that the climate in Beijing really is harsh, or perhaps the other way of interpreting things is to say that we are privileged in our temperate island climate to be able to grow a massive range of plants. The Beijing Botanic Garden staff are proud of the range of plants they grow and that range is certainly vastly more than I saw anywhere else in the city, but it would not stand comparison with anything claiming a similar position in Europe. Time and again I was told that this was a reflection of the harsh climate in Beijing, where winters are very cold, summers very hot and the whole year is marked by a lack of water. Many of the people I spoke with told me they were envious of the range they understood we could grow in the UK, and the Botanic Gardens had an active program trying to discover plants that could be grown on site.

But I quickly decided that other factors were at play in keeping the range of useable plants to a minimum. I visited a number of nurseries in my travels and never once found plants growing in pots. A pot grown plant has a number of advantages over one grown in the field and lifted – it suffers less trauma when moved; it can be planted at any time of the year and it arrives in it’s new situation in a container filled with nourishment – a life support system that will keep it going whilst it’s root system establishes. Plants grown in containers have a much better chance of surviving and are more able to tolerate poor handling on site and poor site conditions. The fact that China does not grow its stock in pots reduces the range of plants that can be used in the Landscape.

A recurring theme in my discussions with nurserymen or contractors was the cost of labour: when I was in Beijing I was repeatedly told that labourers were paid a daily rate of around \$2 per day, and that this represented a doubling of the rate in just twelve months! Unskilled labour is abundant and cheap and as a result the economy has developed to take advantage of this cheap, unskilled labour. However, one affect of this appears to be a reluctance to invest in the training needed to develop a skilled workforce. The level of skill I saw on nurseries and landscape sites was very low, I feel sure that this also influenced the range of plants that can be grown. Without skilled staff in UK nurseries we would suffer large losses of stock that would make

many plant species unviable. Likewise only the most robust of plants can survive the poor handling techniques that I saw on Chinese landscape sites. Just before I left China in the middle of June, in temperatures above 90 degrees, I saw 'bare rooted' trees and shrubs being planted – this would not be entertained in Europe, indeed I would not expect anything to survive it, and yet my Chinese hosts expected the plants I saw to survive – I believe they have identified a narrow range of very hardy plants and judge the hardiness of all else against this standard.

The net result is a very narrow range of plants that are designed into the landscape, and the ramifications of this are worth consideration. Our concern in the UK is that designers of the London Games might require something we don't have. This is a very real likelihood, since the range a designer has to choose from is vast and supply is limited. In Beijing, on the other hand, the range of plants is very small, the 'palette' of plants used on any scheme tends to be the same, supply simply becomes a numbers game - how many of each plant will be needed. Of course I simplify to make a case, in fact the Beijing Olympic Park uses a much wider range than is usual in the city, but the bulk of plants used is made up from a very narrow range.

The scale of construction work going on in Beijing has grown exponentially in recent years and is colossal. A television program that went out in the UK whilst I was in China claimed that three times as much construction work goes on in Beijing in one year as in three years in the whole of Europe! Given that this is a recent explosion and that trees, for example, take many years to grow, I was surprised to find the volume of trees growing on nurseries was so great! If demand for trees in Europe were to jump significantly next year nurserymen would not be able to satisfy that growth because we did not increase our plantings ten or twenty years ago, and yet in China that enormous growth in demand appears to be catered for. I eventually discovered one important reason for a vast increase in production some years ago – the Chinese had very strong hopes of winning the 2000 Olympic Games! Most of the nurseries I visited, once I had discovered the relevant question, told me that they had increased production in preparation for supply of the 2000 Games, not winning those Games had given them significant problems (many appeared to have gone through something similar to 'Bankruptcy') but they had eventually been given the necessary help to grow the stock on for a further 8 years. The result, naturally enough, was a vast wealth of very large stock available for supply to the 2008 Games.

China is a communist state in the throws of a complicated realignment that will allow it to integrate more easily with the capitalist west. I found the Chinese impression of the West to be at times comical and at times frightening – and I'm sure they found my misunderstanding of their society to be the same. It was often very difficult to understand business structures and relationships, presumably because I was trying to fit the facts of a totally foreign entity over my template of how things work in the West. Time and again I struggled to understand how a business was structured but I was left with the impression that many of the 'private' businesses I visited were in fact very closely linked with a state-owned organisation – or with two such organisations – and that a nursery, say, was closely related or linked with a contractor and a landscape architect. I suspect that many of the organisations I visited were once

a part of a 'unit' that delivered a landscape project, incorporating all aspects from plant production to design. These 'Units' have apparently been disbanded, but the relationships between the parts that once made them up appear to be still in evidence.

As a result I did sometimes find the very strong dialog I had expected to find. Landscape Architects often showed a close working relationship with a given landscape contractor or nursery, and those relationships clearly helped to ensure the smooth running of a project. Plant supply issues appeared to be routinely talked through. But I have no doubt that the exceedingly narrow range of plants used and the vast number of plants put into production for the 2000 Games are the real reasons that plants have, generally, been available to satisfy the demand of designers.

The design of the Beijing Olympic Park

My very hectic first two weeks in Beijing answered many of the questions I arrived with all too quickly and without providing me with much to take home. I believe I had discovered how the Chinese were able to ensure plants were available to satisfy the design requirements, but Beijing and Europe appeared so different that I could not find valid lessons for London. However, those hectic first two weeks sent me off on an unexpected tangent.

By pure chance, the International Federation of Landscape Architects held its 2007 conference at the Beijing Botanic Gardens during my first week and the theme of its conference was the design of the Beijing Olympic Park. My friends at the Botanic Gardens were hosting the event and granted me access to the whole program (I think it would have been exceedingly difficult to get access to any of the program had I not developed good 'Guanxi' by this point!) My friends in Beijing had, by this time, helped me to gain access to a number of architects, but the most senior designers and bureaucrats seemed beyond my reach – I had managed to speak with architects involved in small elements of the overall scheme but not with those responsible for the master plan. At the IFLA conference these most important and illusive characters were presented to me along with a selection of their most eminent colleagues from around the world!

Mr Ganzhi Zhou, the President of the Chinese Society of landscape Architects, introduced the conference and told his audience that one of China's main objectives in holding the Games was to demonstrate to China and the World that it was capable of putting on a 'Green Games'. China's image is that of a polluter, clearly the 2008 Games is to be used as a weapon in the battle to change that image internationally and to set higher standards for the Chinese construction Industry to aim at – this came across very strongly at the IFLA conference: the Games are being used as a means of raising the standards of Landscape Architecture in China, to demonstrate to the world that China can take its environmental responsibilities seriously and that there are ways of greening cities as highly populated as Beijing.

It is easy to assume that in raising standards in Beijing the Chinese were starting from a much lower point than in London. Indeed, in conversations with the London Olympic delivery Authority as recently as January 2008 I was surprised to find that, in some circles at least, London believes that the Beijing landscape will not be much to write home about. In fact what the Chinese have done in Beijing is world class!

The 2008 Games have stimulated construction on a vast scale in a city that was already developing at high speed. But the interest in the Olympic Park appears to have added a new dimension to development: Ganzhi Zhou told the conference that all construction work carried out in the city now includes an element of green spaces and that more than fifty new 'Parks' have also been built in the city.

The design of the Park has incorporated radical new thinking in the areas of energy efficiency and environmental conservation. Global warming, we were told, is seen as important by the Chinese; the speaker cited evidence of global warming in China and believed the problem would increase over time. He spoke in heavily accented English, but I heard pride in his voice as he claimed the Beijing Games had put these concerns on a platform for discussion and that the Olympic park would demonstrate the very best of environmental practices. Various Chinese speakers at the conference discussed details of the design and the environmental credentials certainly struck me as impressive. When I spoke with internationally renowned Landscape Architects at lunch and over coffee they confirmed this view unanimously and in her summing up of what she'd seen and heard, Dianne Menzies, IFLA President, stated that the design incorporated the very latest technological developments: the design of the Beijing Olympic park is truly outstanding!

The design of the Beijing Olympic Park incorporates an array of environmental features and it's clear that the need to do so was identified at an early stage. I was told that the design brief demanded that environmental matters should be given a high level of importance and this comes across. The use of water purifying technology is typical of the approach taken toward environmental ideas generally:

The Park's design makes abundant use of water in a city where clean water is in short supply and where the treatment of foul water has in the past been, perhaps, inadequate. No fresh water is taken onto site, which instead makes use of semi-treated 'grey' water from the City, water that would otherwise be considered polluted. Water is taken on site and progresses through a network reed beds, pools and water courses, eventually flowing into the main Park Lake as clear water. The clean water system permeates the whole site and is used as irrigation water, in total the artificial wetland of the park extends to 67.7 hectares.

None of the technology used in this scheme is new, indeed much of it is ancient, but much scientific research into old techniques has been done in recent years and in Beijing this research has been drawn upon. Experts have been brought in from around the world and the scale of the project makes it perhaps the most ambitious 'water treatment' project ever carried out.

Similar examples of environmental thinking can be found throughout the site. 'Bird Towers' have been built, providing a much needed habitat for the 'Beijing Swift', a bird now threatened by loss of habitat in the fast developing city. Another design criteria of the Park was that all sewage produced on site should be treated on site – the park has 'zero sewage discharge'. All the buildings designed to sit in the park make use of geothermal pumps, green-waste is composted and reused on site and the list goes on.

It wasn't just the application of cutting edge environmental technology that impressed the international landscape architects I spoke to. Time and again they commented on the way in which the Chinese have introduced elements of their culture into the design. By this point in my trip I was already discovering that Chinese culture encroaches into the designed landscape more so than in Europe, but I had not begun to understand the details of that encroachment. Again, Dianne Menzies summed this up when she commented that the design 'reflects Chinese culture and takes many of its elements from early Chinese thinking'.

Taking Stock

By the end of my second week in Beijing I had achieved a great deal: I had spoken with the Master Planner of the Olympic Park and with several of those who had worked up areas of that design to a detailed level. I had visited several of the Landscape Contractors responsible for carrying out the work and had seen a number of the sites of Olympic venues and visited nurserymen on the nurseries where plants were grown. I had examined the question that most concerned me when I set off from London: namely how had the Chinese ensured that plants would be available when they were needed, and I had discovered an answer that sadly had little relevance in European terms. I had also been inspired by the design of the Beijing Olympic park, so much so that a new idea was developing – that the true and lasting legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games could be the Park itself.

A number of things had come together in Beijing to change the way the public and the construction industry look upon the landscaped environment. Firstly the design draws on classical Chinese principles that capture the public's imagination: the public like it! Secondly the design incorporates the very best in environmental technology that solves real environmental problems and demonstrates its usefulness to all. And finally the method by which the project was delivered put the profession of Landscape Architect in a position of very real responsibility, the profession was seen to deliver and is now recognised and respected as a result. I decided to investigate these areas in more detail whilst in China.

When I left England for China I had just one personal contact: a 'student' I had met at Staffordshire University, sent there by her province to take a one year MBA course. I had met her and her friends a number of times but had no idea of what she actually did in China, but she had been insistent that I should visit her and she had promised that she could show me an Olympic site that that would be relevant to my visit. And so I set off from Beijing to Shenyang in Liaoning province not really knowing what I would find there.

Again I fell on my feet. It turned out that my friend Spring was what I think we would call the 'Finance Director' of a government department that provided funding for provincial projects, one of these projects was the construction of a new football stadium in which a number of the Olympic football matches would be played. In fact the man responsible for the construction of the Stadium was Spring's former boss, the man who had sent her to Staffordshire University. I was given almost unrestricted access to the site and the professionals responsible for its construction.

Shenyang is a city a few hundred miles north of Beijing where, as in much of China, development is going on at a staggering rate. It is interesting to note that the landscape design of the largest area under development here, a 'new city' called Teiling, is being designed by the team responsible for the Beijing Olympic Park – the Beijing Tsingua Urban Planning and Design Institute - and I think it is fair to say the reputation they earned in Beijing lead directly to their involvement in the Province of Liaoning. It was again emphasised to me that landscape design is perceived as more important now than it was only a few years ago. This is partly because 'things Environmental' are seen as more important now than previously but also because of the impact of the design on the Beijing Olympic Park on the construction industry in China.

In my conversations with landscape professionals in China, and indeed in conversations with landscape architects from the International Federation of Landscape Architects, I repeatedly asked what made the design of the Olympic Park so inspirational. Time and again I was given the same answer: it is the innovative use of modern environmental technology coupled with the way that ideas from traditional Chinese gardening are incorporated into the design. In my time in Beijing I visited many parks and palaces where I came across elements of traditional gardening ideas but I struggled to understand what I was looking at! I decided to spend some of my remaining time in China developing a better understanding of this subject and arranged to travel to the cities of Hangzhou, Suzhou and Shanghai, where I was told I would find examples of the best of traditional Chinese gardens.

Chinese Gardens

Very few people in Beijing have a garden of their own. Some 'private' housing does now exist, on a very small scale, but even here private gardens are almost unheard of. This is quite a contrast with the British - regarded the world over as compulsive gardeners. But the lack of gardens in Beijing makes people eager to take advantage of any green space available. The result is a population that makes great use of its parks – something our park managers would be envious of.

Every school day I saw elderly grandparents dropping off a single grandchild at the school gate and then move, in crowds, to the nearest park. Here they exercise in large groups, or sit playing chess or Mah-jong, or even take over a large pagoda, set up a cd player and hold an impromptu dance. At weekends parks are bursting with visitors – exercise areas are used to the full and 'keep off the grass' signs are ignored as groups of families set up for the day. It is important to realise that whilst the Chinese might not be 'gardeners' in the way that the British are said to be, they treasure time spent in a park or garden.

Very broadly, Chinese gardens can be categorised as Temple; Palace and Private, but these categories sometimes blend into each other. To the western eye these all seem strange, cluttered and complicated places, emphasising the fundamental differences in the way the East and the West look at the world. I found very strong evidence of 'Feng Sui' where ever I went in China and it is ever present in gardens. Its essence seems to be the attempt to create harmony between man and his place in nature by balancing certain representations of fundamental elements. As an example, great harmony (and thus good fortune) is thought to exist in a dwelling sited due south of a

mountain and connected to that mountain by water. This belief is introduced to a home or even an office by placing a symbolic rock (representing a mountain) to the North and some kind of water feature between it and the entrance to the home or office.

In the Olympic Park this is taken to extremes by the creation of an artificial mountain and by the vast water courses that run through the site. By placing the Olympic Park on the exact North–South axis of the City (an axis that runs through Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City) the design improves the good fortune of the whole City!

Rocks, representing mountains, caused me the most difficulty! A whole art form is dedicated to the appreciation of rocks and their symbolism, but this is very often lost on the Western eye. My Chinese friends could become enthralled by what looked to me like a pile of rocks placed haphazardly on top of each other and crudely mortared into place. The summit of the ‘mountain’ in the Olympic Park is capped off with a rockery, the highest point taken by a single massive stone. The people of China have already endowed this stone with mystical properties – those lucky enough to have visited the Park before it has opened are already making a fuss of it. It is patted, bowed to and kissed, when the Park does open the stone on top of the mountain is likely to become one of its greatest attractions!

Chinese gardens use plants in a very different way to those in Europe. The temperate climate of the UK allows us to grow an unrivalled range of plants, although the range nature left us with when the ice-age receded was actually very slight! I have a theory that it was the dearth of indigenous plants that got the early plant collectors so excited - the English have certainly been keener than any other nation to introduce plants from overseas. The Chinese, by comparison, have a broad palette to choose from (although what will grow in Beijing is not nearly so great) but make most use of a very small range. But that narrow, unchanging range of indigenous plants has developed great folk meaning over time and that meaning seems to be almost universally recognised.

Bamboo, for example, is regarded as the stately gentlemen of the plant world - it grows tall and straight by nature of its ability to bend against any wind that might batter it, even its hollow centre is seen as a sign of humility. The slow growing pine, evergreen in even the coldest winter, demonstrates the honour due to the elderly and the spring flowering plum, which is often in flower whilst snow still sits on its branches, represents hope and the possibility of good things to come. Perhaps in times past our ancestors associated similar meaning with our native flora but not much of it has survived the incoming of plants from the rest of the world. Chinese people seem able to ‘read’ the language of plants used in gardens, and much use is made of this in the Olympic park.

Chinese poetry – and calligraphy – has been used in Chinese gardens for thousands of years. Perhaps it is the unchanging nature of the Chinese written language that has allowed this to happen (how many in the West could understand a text written a thousand years ago?) Chinese gardens are expected to contain a little calligraphy, which the educated recognise and interpret as a little pearl of wisdom from history.

Palace gardens make much use of imperial iconography; again this is easily lost on the Westerner. The dragon is perhaps the best example – a mythical animal that should not be confused with its western cousin. Our dragon is remembered as a fearful beast – an enemy, something to be defeated. The Chinese dragon symbolises the greatest possible expression of the spirit, a thing of glory and of great power, and was the sole property of the Emperor. In Imperial times the symbol of the dragon could only be used by the Emperor, it would have been well known but not frequently encountered by the masses and so it became a thing of legend. It is now found all over China, but power and majesty still hangs to it. When viewed from the sky, the vast water system of the Olympic Park is seen to be in the shape of a dragon. Whilst this can't be seen from any point in the Park the Chinese people know it's there, and they love it!

I became fascinated by Chinese gardens and am full of admiration for the way in which the designers have incorporated their traditions and beliefs into the Olympic Park. The Chinese people are more naturally inclined to make use of their parks than we in the West but the use of this gardening 'pattern language' provides a dimension to their visit that would be missing to most of us in the West. The international Landscape Architects I spoke with said time and again that London should aim to build the Western equivalent of all this tradition into the London Olympic Park. It's a wonderful idea and I fully support it, but I have little advice to give as to how it might be done!

Epilogue

Before going to China I visited the Olympic Delivery Authority where the Landscape Architecture team were interested to hear of my visit and invited me to let them know what I found in Beijing. I was able to send a number of informal reports from China to London during my stay and these were also well received. In November 2007 the Tsingua University Landscape Office wrote to tell me of plans for their design team, lead by Professor Hu, to visit Europe and they asked if I could provide an audience for them to speak to. With only a few weeks notice and Christmas taking up a chunk of that time it was not possible to pull together a large event but the opportunity seemed too good to squander. With help from the Horticultural Trades Association a concise seminar was held at which the Tsingua team gave a presentation showing how the design for the Beijing Games was arrived at and outlining some of its most interesting features.

The audience was made up of prominent nurserymen, landscape contractors, landscape architects and the Trade Press, as well as relevant staff from the Olympic Delivery Authority and its delivery partners. In conversations with some of the audience before the event I was left with the impression that many involved in the London bid were not expecting the Beijing landscape to be very impressive! It's easy to be lead by the common held view of China as an unsophisticated nation where environmental pollution on a massive scale is endemic – and perhaps this is the case – but the design of the Olympic Park is world class. The presentation left no one in any doubt of this.

I am enormously grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for the chance to visit China and Beijing. Through my visit I have been able to raise awareness of the

standard of landscaping that has been carried out in China and to 'raise the bar' with regard to the expectation of landscaping of the London Games. I believe I have successfully identified certain elements of the Chinese design that eminent Landscape Architects credit with its success and have challenged the London designers to build, in their own way, corresponding elements into the London Park.

I have also identified a 'quantum change' brought about by the Beijing Games in the standing of the Landscape Architecture in China and have thrown down a gauntlet to Landscape Architects in this country in a challenge to make the London Games do the same here. Environmental issues seem more pressing now than at any time in the past, the Chinese have named the Beijing Games the 'Green Olympics', London has the chance to make an even greater statement in 2012. I hope my Fellowship might help inspire those responsible for the landscape in London to set their aim to new heights.