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Trees, history and cities: The oriental saga

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Trees, history and cities:
The oriental saga

Presentation outline

1. Hunting and gathering existence
2. Sedentary agricultural livelihood
3. Advent of ancient cities
4. Modern western influence
5. Recent opportunities and challenges

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Steeped in tree lores and traditions

➢ Trees being bigger, stronger, more majestic, longer living than many organisms
➢ Trees as benevolent provider and protector of humans
➢ The world and human fate controlled by nature
➢ Profound and universal emotional bonding between trees and humans
➢ Commonality traversing geographical, temporal and cultural divides


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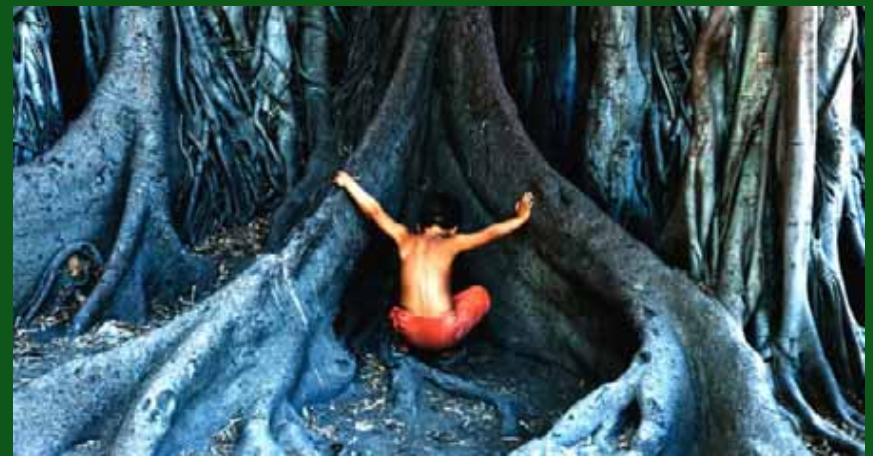
➢ Primitive people held trees in high esteem or in awe
➢ Special status: admiration, respect, adoration, veneration, worship
➢ Mythologies, legends and folklores, echoing deep love and fear of trees
➢ Bestowing sacred status to trees or groves: Deities or abodes of certain spirits
➢ "Tree of Life" belief permeating through a succession of ancient cultures
➢ Cultural equifinality, same human species, same love and fear, same fate and destiny

Fraternity tie (mitini) between trees and people, Sikkim
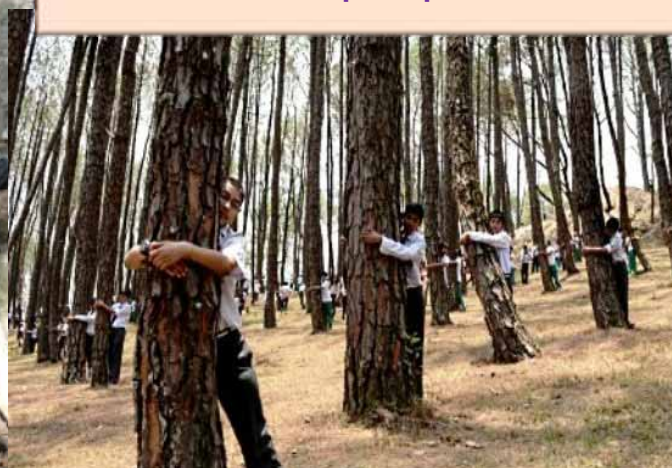
➢ Preserving tree worship behaviours and rituals
➢ Contributions to nature conservation

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Jinping County, Guizhou

Takao, Tokyo

Key traits and commentary

➤From Palaeolithic, forest as Mother of humanity

➤The colossal tree connecting earth to heaven

➤Passage to deities and the sun

➤Strong belief in the immortal tree

➤Symbolizing health and longevity, continuity and prosperity

➤Probably related to the sacred Mulberry Tree:

Domesticated in northern China

2. Sedentary agricultural livelihood

Pragmatic benefits of trees to agrarian society

➢ Deeply-rooted traditional belief system in East Asia: China, Japan and Korea
➢ Systematically practised as *fengshui* (wind and water or geomancy) *woodland*
➢ Wrapping village settlements in horseshoe configuration
➢ Soil and water conservation
➢ Microclimatic amelioration (wind, fresh air, moderated temperature)
➢ Sustaining natural conditions for human welfare and survival

Key traits and commentary

➢Keeping natural layered forest biomass structure and indigenous species

➢Enriched with economic and medicinal plants

➢Limited harvesting: fruits, nuts, herbal medicine, fodder, game, timber, firewood

➢Biodiversity hotspots, contributing to nature conservation

➢Sustainable protection for centuries by superstition

➢Taboo and sanction tied to sacredness and deities (surrogate law enforcement)

➢Protected by fear of supernatural retribution on present and future generations

➢Scholars' way of communicating an abstract idea to illiterate peasants

➢Conservation by cultural internalization of a common belief

➢*Progenitor or precursor of urban forestry* (forest contiguous to settlement)

➢Pioneer of *trans-generational urban forestry* (inherited and inheritable)

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Practicality of planting trees in urban settlements
- ➤ Sustenance: Fruits, nuts, fodder, timber
- ➤ Sensory: Shading, cooling, scent, sound
- ➤ Cognitive: Aesthetic, nostalgic, re-connection with nature
- ➤ What and where to plant: Amenities versus disamenities

Symbol of power, wealth, prestige and taste
- ➢ Selected main roads for regular passage of royalty and officials
- ➢ Plaza or market place where people congregate for long durations
- ➢ Religious and institutional sites
- ➢ Private gardens of aristocracy, nobility, gentry and merchant

Qing Court Version of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*; original scroll by Zhang Zeduan (   ) of Northern Song Dynasty, depicting the capital Bianjing in c. 1100 BP

Residence of the rich and powerful [Peach blossom; trees on rockery]

Market place and quayside [Individual trees, tree row; lakeside willow; kids playing on tree]
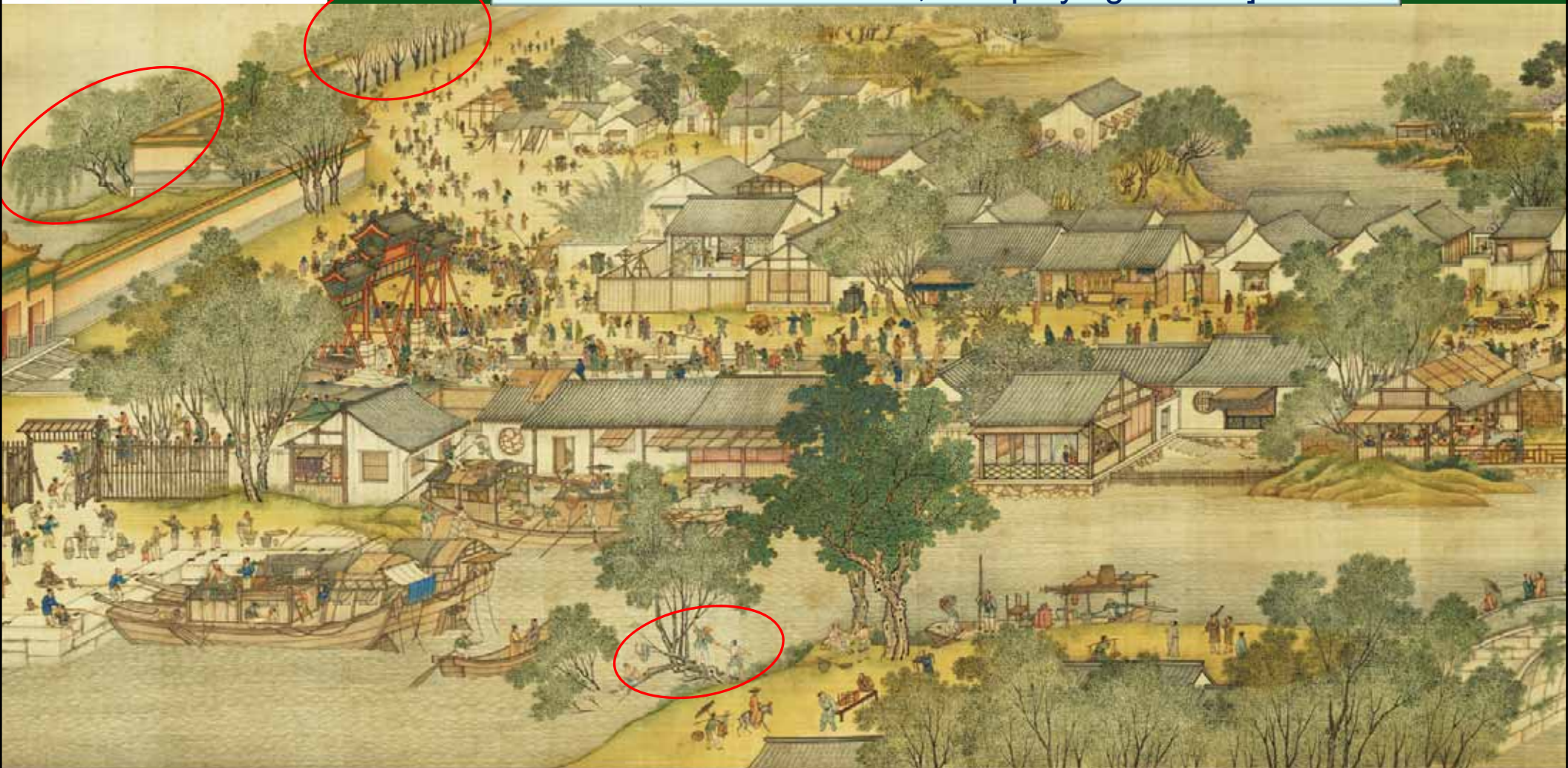
Riverside and home gardens [Large trees with dense foliage; trees in small home yards; trees on dyke; tree props]

Busy main road and domestic gardens [Some roadside trees; linear tree row along river bank and lane]

Busy main plaza [Narrow street with trees; trees in institutional grounds, and trees in garden

Home yards [Trees in tight spaces and proximal to entrances]
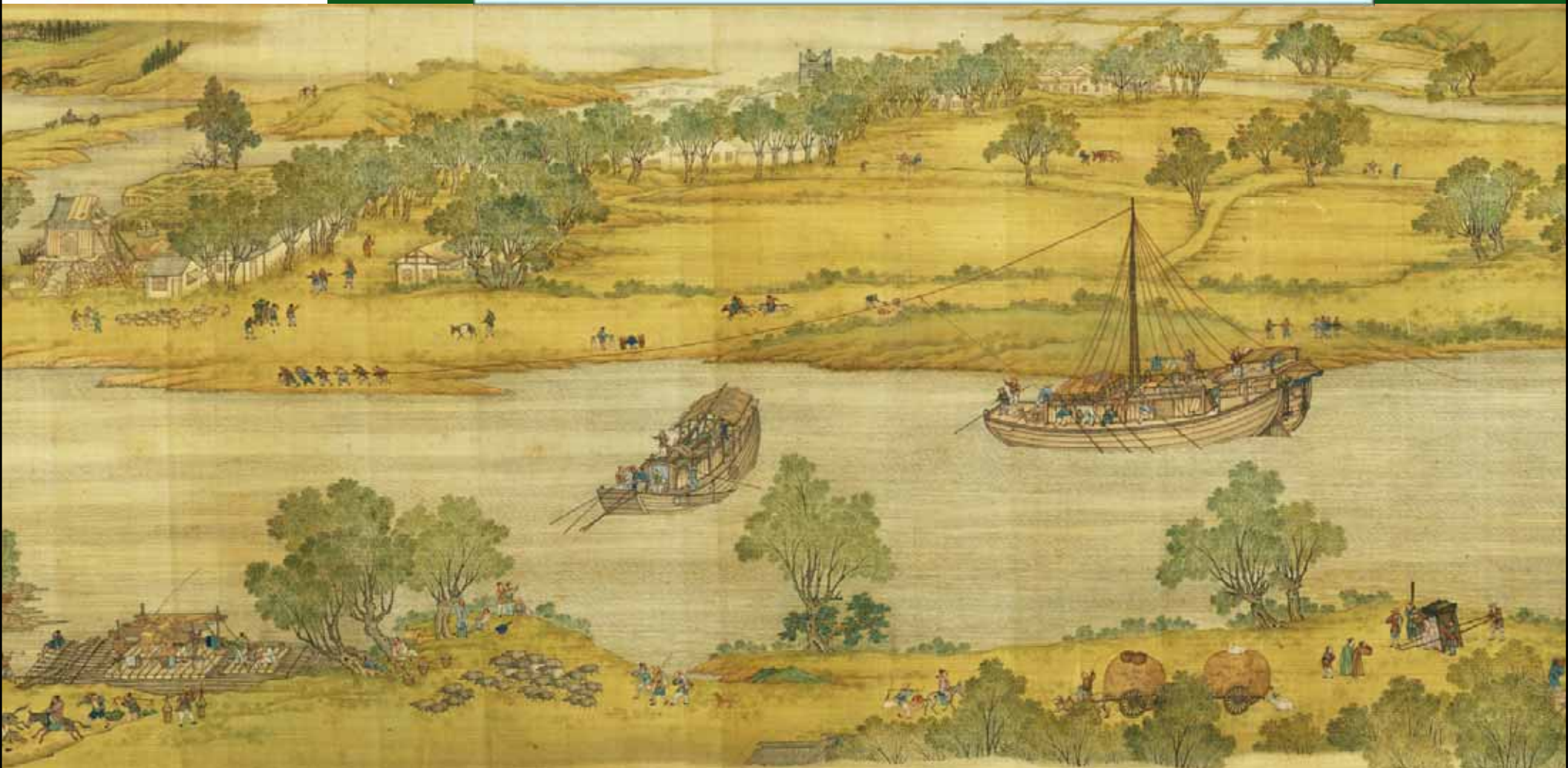
City gate [Tree transplanted with wrapped root ball; spontaneous vegetation on masonry city wall; tree row along city wall]

Rustic scene [Tree row along linear waterfront settlement, country roads and field edges]

Key traits and commentary

➢Ancient cities, especially walled ones, were usually small and dense
   with limited space for trees
➢Proximity to nature, literally at the town's doorstep
➢Little need for nature's surrogates in the town, yet trees still planted in cramped niches
➢Residences of well-off families with enclosed private gardens

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Lijiang c. 700 BP
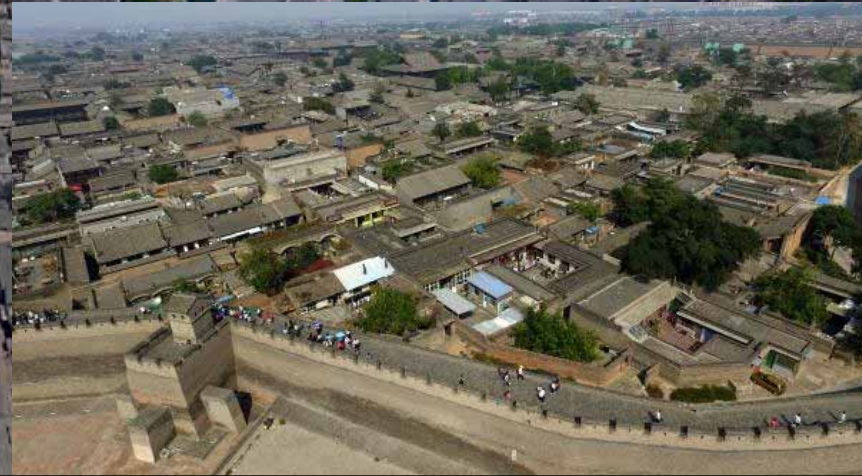UNESCO World Heritage Site

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Pingyao 2700 BP; dense walled city UNESCO World Heritage Site

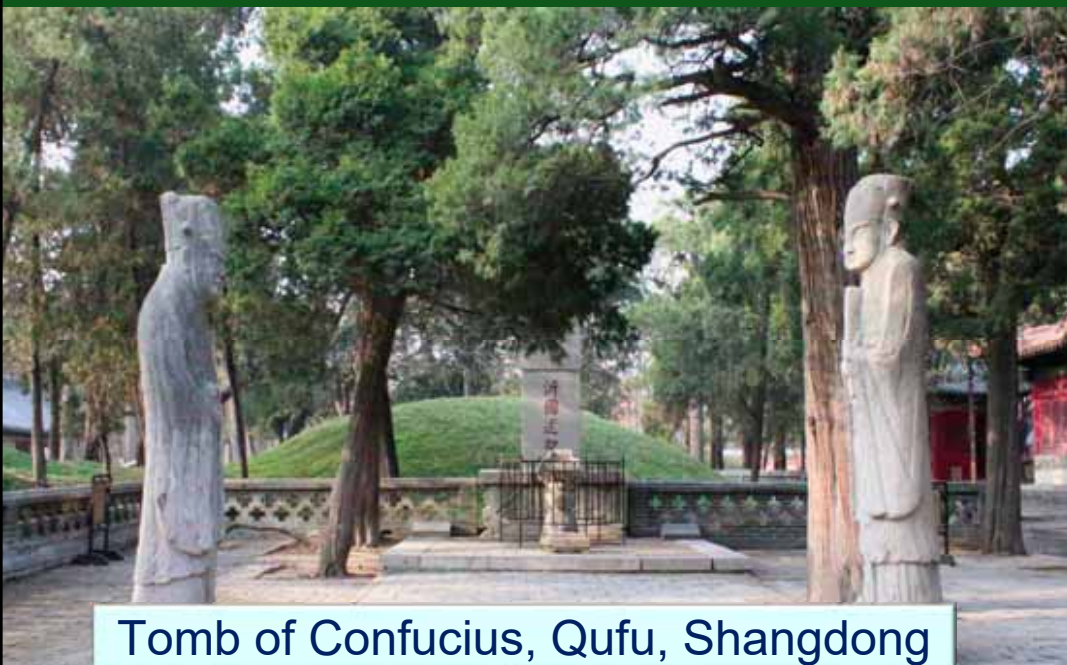Trees scattered in tiny interstitial niches amongst tightly packed house

➢Population increase: Infilling and densification, squeezing out intra-mural gardens

➢Some rich families moved to live outside the city walls: Prototype suburbs

➢Not just losing gardens and trees: Displacing people with the background, mentality, intention, appreciation, and experience of planting in urbanized areas

➢Densified walled towns entered the dark age of urban greening

➢Remnant residences in old town: Intra-mural villas with embedded green pockets

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Scholar's gardens

- Sacred, religious and institutional sites often persisted with old trees
- Cemeteries of renowned personalities with tree cover
- Confucius' tomb (c. 1500 BP) with diverse tree collection brought by his disciples from lands near and far
- Regarded as the first arboretum in China

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Tomb of Confucius, Qufu, Shangdong

Gu Guanyin Buddhist Temple Zhongnan Mountains, near Xi'an

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Western colonial and other influences

➢ Mainly 18th to 19th century

➢ European urban greening practices established since the Renaissance and matured in the Industrial Revolution

➢ Avenue, promenade and esplanade planting

➢ Squares and plazas

➢ Urban parks and public gardens

➢ Botanic garden (for science and resource use)

Hong Kong

Taipei

- ➢ Suburban villas and country estates with private gardens
- ➢ Military sites: Spacious with good tree cover
- ➢ European landscape fads and fashion
- ➢ Exotic species introduced from Europe and other colonies
- ➢ Jump migration of plants following movement of people and goods
- ➢ Homogenization of urban plant species in different cities
- ➢ Examples: Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Guangzhou, Xiamen, Shanghai, Taipei

Garden city estate, Hong Kong

Key traits and commentary

➤Superposition of western influence on existing baseline

➤Previously: Individual land owners' idiosyncratic choice of species, geographical provenance, planting site, planting pattern and tree care

➤Individual decisions collectively constitute the city's urban tree stock

➤Western planting: Regimentation in public space, plus personal preferences

➤Using exotic species: Original landscape character diluted by exotic ingredients

Shamian Island, Guangzhou

- Some private gardens acquired by the government
- Some donated by or bequeathed to the community
- High-quality ready-made urban parks or public gardens
- Institutional, religious & cemetery grounds with persistent land use: Preserving old trees
- Suburbs engulfed by urban expansion: Bland residential areas with few trees
- Urban sprawl: Destroying original peri-urban woodlands
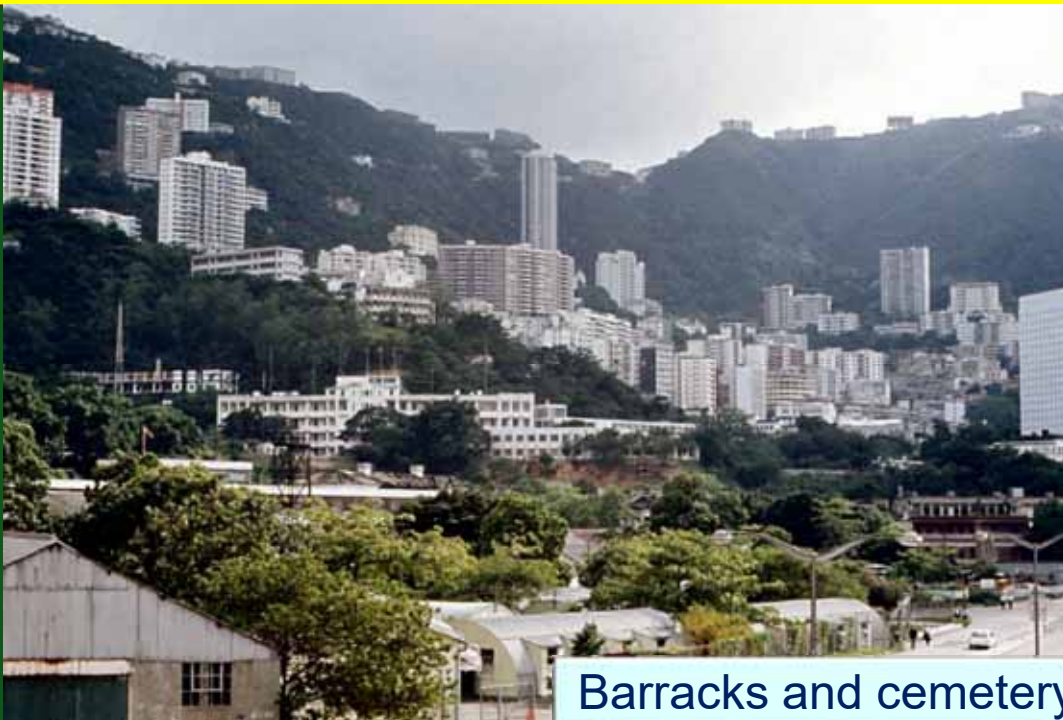
Barracks and cemetery, Hong Kong

- Planning and custodian of urban forest: Mainly civil servants moulding city landscape
- First time in history of urban greening: So many (trees and their enjoyment by citizens) determined by so few
- Decision of the few: May make or mar the city's sylvan character
- Foster citizen engagement in urban forest decisions

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The dominant urban era

➤ Over half of human population living in cities in 2018, reaching 70% by 2050
➤ Looming climate change and massive environmental degradation
➤ Grave consequences on mortality, morbidity and health care
➤ Nature-based solutions to ameliorate or prevent further decline

Platform for nature based solutions

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Comprehensive urban renewal

➢ Redevelopment of old urban cores and neighbourhoods
➢ Conversion to high-rise and high-density
➢ Clean slate approach: Overhaul town plan
➢ Often obliterating existing greenery, including old trees
➢ New greening standards and landscape design
➢ Address environmental inequality

Xintiandi and Taipingqiao, Shanghai

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New tree-friendly development mode

➢ Pedestrianize shopping streets or precincts
➢ Convert some streets to linear parks, greenways or blueways
➢ Restore urban rivers and canals
➢ Revitalize old building sites
➢ Provide liberally green spaces, water features, green roofs and green walls
➢ Transfer development rights to create green spaces

Daan Forest Park, Taipei

Cheonggyecheon Restoration, Seoul

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Thank You Comments and Questions are Welcomed