

# Intergenerational Gatherings Among the Water and Willows

**Urban parks can be extraordinarily peaceful, and even spiritual. With water, flowers, birds, trees, and breath-taking views blending with architectural elements and sculpture, they create spaces that feel far removed from what surrounds them. These sanctuaries are like magnets pulling people in from all backgrounds and ages.**



Figure 1: A typical gathering in an open space at West Lake. Note the wide range of ages, even among the performers and musicians.

For years I have worked, lived in, or visited virtually all of East Asia, a region whose cultures I have deeply loved from the very beginning. Thus, I vividly remember my first impressions of the beautiful parks I found scattered throughout massive urban landscapes, particularly in China, and how extraordinarily peaceful, even spiritual, they were, and still are. Water, flowers, birds, trees, and breath-taking views blend with architectural elements and sculpture to create spaces that feel far removed from what surrounds them. These sanctuaries are like magnets pulling people in from all backgrounds and ages, at all times of day and night, in all seasons, and for a multiplicity of purposes. In the morning one might find groups practicing tai chi, in the afternoon they may be strolling or picnicking, in the evening there might be dancing and singing.

One location that epitomizes the best of this is West Lake, Hangzhou, China, in my view, a perfect example of what an Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) can and should be. West Lake is a "great attractor" for me. I love Hangzhou, but what excites me the most about visiting this great city, is that every time I am there I know I will squeeze out as much time as I can to walk around the lake, sit on its benches, meditate over its beauty and absorb its vistas, watch the local people, have tea in its gardens, and allow myself to be fully engaged and energized. Allow me to share some of this.



## About West Lake

West Lake sits at one end of a bustling city whose official population is somewhere between 7-8 million. Its east end abuts a business and shopping district, and beyond that, the sprawling urban metropolis of Hangzhou. However, on its other three sides, the lake is surrounded by gentle rolling hills, covered with trees, forming a perfect backdrop. A road for cars and buses rings the lake, with business and residential districts bordering it. There is also a smattering of hotels, as West Lake is a popular tourist destination. Its history and natural beauty are renowned, and it has been the subject of paintings, poetry and graceful living for centuries. Its gardens are said to be the inspiration for ornamental garden design throughout Asia. The surrounding hills accommodate tea plantations and villages, ancient temples, pavilions, and pagodas. Admittedly, West Lake is unique, evidenced by the fact that in 2011 the lake and surrounding area became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In inscribing "The West Lake Cultural Landscape of Hangzhou" on its World Heritage List, UNESCO described it as bearing "an exceptional testimony to the **cultural tradition of improving landscapes** to create a series of vistas reflecting an **idealized fusion between humans and nature.**" I agree. Through my eyes, West Lake is a manifestation of the culture from which it has emanated. It harmonizes the natural world and the people who inhabit it; for West Lake is not just a tourist destination. It is a welcoming setting where the citizens of Hangzhou can relax and enjoy each other.

## West Lake as an ICZ

One particularly outstanding quality of urban Chinese parks is that they do not allow the cities that surround them to intrude into their environment or puncture their tranquillity. This is true of West Lake. The lake proper is almost entirely encircled by trees, many of them weeping willows or peach trees that bloom profusely in the spring. There are two causeways that divide the lake into sections, connecting all sides of it. These are not just flat stretches of road, but feature traditional Chinese arched bridges. Huge lotus ponds- that bloom all summer- are tucked into the corners of the causeways and other parts of the lake. Pathways cover both the causeways and the areas they connect so it is possible to go by foot or bike around most of the lake, which many people do. Benches and grass are contiguous to the pathways, allowing people to stop and rest, talk, eat, and enjoy the magnificent views, or watch the unbelievably beautiful sunsets. Teashops and coffee houses dot the shores, and most have outdoor patios with views as well as indoor space. Some are located in historical buildings, exuding charm. Nearby, there are historical sites and museums for visiting. There are ferries that traverse the lake, mimicking the classical style of ancient Chinese vessels. There are also bicycles and boats one can rent, to circumnavigate the area.

Along most of the lake's perimeter there are also parks, with two principle components: designated open space and pavilions where people can gather. In some instances these are adjacent to each other. The pavilions offer shelter from the sun and rain. The open spaces are generally paved or have wooden surfaces. Both contain seating. Benches are built into the sides of the pavilions, while the open spaces may have low walls or benches. These areas are beautifully landscaped and very often contain sculpture. The latter have cultural or historical significance, whether the image is an acclaimed individual from the past (e.g., Confucius) or people from everyday Chinese life, for example, traders, fishermen, or scholars. These artistic endeavors are aesthetically pleasing and inviting. People come to photograph and admire them; children want to play on them. They lend a cosy and personal feeling to the space. I should add that, from my experience, these pavilions and open spaces are continuously filled with people singing, dancing, talking, taking photos, playing musical instruments, mahjong, and board games.



Figure 2: Dancing at West Lake.

Every evening, at one end of the lake, there is a "dancing waters" show, accompanied by music and lights, which occur at regular intervals. Chairs are set up along the side of the lake for people to watch it; or it can be viewed from the open spaces or outdoor cafes nearby. There is no cost for this. Anyone can attend. At the other end of the lake, there is a (paid) performance of "Impression West Lake," a unique production staged by the famous Chinese director, Zhang Yimou. The story is derived from traditional Chinese folklore and the entire performance takes place over the water, on a specially designed platform constructed just under the water's surface.

The point I wish to emphasize here is that all of these amenities and spaces are not just designed for the enjoyment of tourists, but for anyone. Families come out to picnic or go boating, biking or walking together. Others just want to absorb the scenery and views. Many, many people gather together as strangers, unselfconsciously enjoying mutual interest activities. I have been at West Lake during holidays, festivals, but mostly during quieter times. It is always crowded with families, singles, couples, young, old, and in between- all mixing together. From what I have personally and repeatedly experienced, it is utterly ageless. Everyone is welcome.

### What we can learn about ICZs from West Lake

West Lake developed in two ways: organically and deliberately. Although it is a man-made lake, it is, and always has been, a place of spectacular natural beauty. However, over the years it has gone from being a retreat for the elite to a public space. The Hangzhou government has been instrumental in this transformation. It has been responsible for the development, construction, refurbishment, and maintenance of the parks, gardens and walkways around the lake. It has allowed restaurants and cafes to be opened, and even some souvenir shops to operate. It has permitted a variety of diverse activities to take place 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Its police patrol the space to keep it safe. The city of Hangzhou provides public transportation to the lake, making it convenient and accessible to the local citizenry.

Most of all, the lake and surrounding parks are a reflection of the Chinese peoples' love of nature and especially gardens and parks, which have been traditional gathering places throughout their history. As UNESCO observed, West Lake is a "testimony to the cultural tradition of improving landscapes..." These kinds of spaces are an integral and meaningful part of the culture. They will always draw people because they are simply a natural part of life.

How does this translate into a successful ICZ? I would like to suggest a formula, modeled after West Lake:

1. Create a venue that has **astounding natural beauty**, and is responsive to the **cultural needs** of the people who are intended to use it. Resources should be made available to maintain, refurbish and enhance it, and to make it accessible and safe.
2. Provide "amenities" that are age neutral. Beautiful walkways, parks, and gardens provide people with a focal point or means to follow their own interests. Not only can they walk, bike or boat, they can, for example, bird watch or enjoy the ornamental gardens. What you don't see at West Lake are playgrounds, basketball courts, football pitches, and other spaces dedicated to a particular age or interest group, or that disrupt the tranquility of the space. That is not to say these are not appropriate for use as ICZs somewhere else, just not this environment.



3. Sometimes less is more. The combination of pavilions and open spaces, so long as they are well thought out and purposeful, may be enough. Many of the activities taking place at West Lake do not require more than this. The people I continually see bring their own musical instruments, microphones, boom boxes, and karaoke machines. If people **share a common interest**, they will likely find ways to identify each other and communicate regardless of their age or background.

4. Resist the temptation to overdevelop. Restaurants, cafes, shops and hotels should be unobtrusive, out of the way, mostly hidden from view, and kept to a minimum. Importantly, they should not interfere with peoples' views or quiet enjoyment of the space. Likewise, the surrounding area should be left alone. Build Senior Centres, schools, medical facilities, and so forth somewhere else.

It is true that West Lake has matured over time, and that it is favored by its location. However, whether by luck, intention, or both, the right balance has been achieved. The concept and orientation are worthy of reflection and perhaps application elsewhere.



Figure 3: Humanlike statues scattered throughout the open spaces at West Lake.

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