

## The Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool --the Evolution of a Miniature Chinese Garden on American Territory

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**Abstract:** The Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool is the representation of an actual scenic location in the Guangdong province in China. Due to the growth of immigration in America, a Chinese-American artist created a miniature replica of the Seven Star Crags in the heart of Los Angeles County, in the city of Chinatown. This paper mainly introduces the history of this scenic site which is an important cultural symbol for Chinese immigrants in America as well and tries to arouse people's attention to its value.

### 1. Introduction

In the heart of Los Angeles County, in the city of Chinatown, lies an important fragment of Chinese culture. The Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool is the representation of an actual scenic location in the Guangdong province in China and was created by artist Liu Hong Kay in 1939 upon the completion of the New Chinatown. This piece of art was not only a subject that would have been close to the heart of Chinese immigrants both literally and spiritually, it was also an important visual creation that symbolized China for the Americans. After giving a brief history on the New Chinatown and the origins of its inhabitants, I will concentrate on the Seven Star Crags Park in China as well as its miniature replica in Los Angeles, providing details about its Chinese significance. I will conclude by pointing out how this Chinese creation that fascinated Americans has lost its original meaning because of the damage it has sustained. Its history, however, is about to change, as it is on the verge of being adopted as Chinese American.

### 2. The Birth of the Miniature Replica of the Seven Star Crags

Los Angeles Chinatown was the first planned urban Chinatown in the United States. Its creation reveals the strength of an immigrant population, which had to overcome challenging beginnings. The first Chinese man in the Los Angeles area was recorded in 1852. Other men followed, and even though they faced much discrimination, such as not being able to obtain their citizenship or own property, they grew strong. By the end of the nineteenth century there were 3,000 Chinese people. The original place of settlement, today remembered as old Chinatown, was destroyed completely, as the site was needed to build Union Station. The evicted Chinese immigrants found a great spokesperson in Peter Soo Hoo, a Chinese-American, fluent in Cantonese and English, who had graduated from an American college. Along with American, Herbert, Lapham, he was able to negotiate a new piece of land for his people. It would be celebrated as the new Chinatown. 1938 was to mark a new beginning for the Chinese in Los Angeles. A plaque on Central Plaza designates Mr. Peter Soo Hoo and Mr. Herbert Lapham as the co-founders of the new Chinatown.<sup>1</sup> The architecture around Chinatown is a combination of American material with Chinese forms. It was designed to be appreciated by Chinese immigrants and their families as well as the tourists who could appreciate the Chinese culture in a foreign land. The Seven Star Caverns wishing pool was a great addition to Central Plaza, as it could have significance for both the local Chinese and the American visitors.

The Chinese significance is probably what prompted Liu Hong Kay to create a miniature replica of the Seven Star Crag. The original site of the crags is in the Guangdong province, and as stated by Wong Ho Leun, in *An American Chinatown*, “the majority of Chinese immigrants to California in the nineteenth century were Cantonese yeoman farmers from Guangdong province.”<sup>2</sup> we can then hypothesize that they would identify the Seven Star Caverns and recognize Kay’s artistic creation as a place from home that not only they would not only be able to enjoy but that they could use to teach American born children about their homeland.

### **3. The Change Course of the Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool**

#### **3.1 The Introduction of the Seven Star Crag Park in China**

The Seven Star Crag Park in China is “composed of five lakes, six hills, seven crags and eight caves” covering a total lush area of almost eight square kilometers<sup>3</sup>. It takes its name from the fact that there are seven limestone crags in the park, “naturally arranged in the same formation as the seven stars of the Big Dipper constellation.”<sup>4</sup> Many legends exist about how the site came to be. Some people believe that the peaks came from stars that fell from the sky. Others think that they are “seven miraculous stones left by Nu Wa when she mended the sky”<sup>5</sup> Nu Wa is a Chinese goddess of creation who is also known for “patching up the falling heavens” with rocks.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the explanation of how the site came to be, the implication is spiritual. The spiritual element is reinforced by the fact that the crags are surrounded by water and therefore have all the natural elements for being the home of the immortals. The presence of the caves emphasizes the association with the immortals, as they were also enchanted worlds or dwelling places for these beings.<sup>7</sup>

Since “Shan Shui, the Chinese word for landscape literally means water and mountain”<sup>8</sup>, we can deduce that the Seven Star Crag Park contains the main elements of a traditional Chinese garden. Furthermore, the fact that the mountains are lush, natural occurrences and not man-made, gives the park an even stronger garden presence. As stated by Ji Cheng, a garden design master from the Ming dynasty who wrote about the theory of constructing a garden, “the most picturesque position for a garden is among tree-clad hills, where there are high slopes and hollows, winding fissures and deep gullies, tall overhanging cliffs and flat level ground, and the site has developed its own natural attractions without the jarring note of human handiwork.”<sup>9</sup> To make the garden design of the Seven Star Crag Park complete and respect the principles of a Chinese garden landscape, a balance between the Yin and Yang or complementary opposites was necessary. Humans had to add their creations in the form of architecture and writing. There are five hundred and twenty three inscriptions in the Chinese park. “Four were written during the Tang Dynasty, one hundred and seventeen in the Qing dynasty, ten in the Republic of China, one hundred and nine in the modern days and forty four in an unknown era.” Li Yong was the first calligrapher from which we have a trace in 727. After his mark, “scholars visiting the Seven Star Crag wrote poems and created inscriptions or paintings on the cliffs to describe the scenery and express their feelings.” The Chinese park is then not only an amazing, miraculous site; it is full of history and therefore contains all the elements that make it a substantive subject for the Chinese-American in Los Angeles.

#### **3.2 The Design of the Original Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool**

The Seven Star Caverns wishing pool in Los Angeles has changed over the decades. As I am trying to find the origin of the piece, I will have to rely on what I can decipher from older photos. I will later address the contemporary look of the wishing pool. The original black and white photographs are overall views that do not provide a close-up of its features, yet there are several elements that we can identify. The totality of the pool seems to be about eight square meters. This estimation would make the size of the wishing well a thousand times smaller than the original park, therefore an ideal microcosm of the Seven Star Crag Park. In its early stages, the enclosure surrounding the pond had

plants around it as well as close to it. A large willow tree can be seen in the background of the picture. The willow tree actually has recorded history since famous Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong planted it. The mountains of the pool are lush, yet have a rugged, jagged surface. Numerous caves and hiding places emerge as we examine the miniature mountains carefully. Many statues of Buddha, humans and animals, as well as pagodas appear among the rocky surface. There are pavilions and small bridges linking one area to another. Winding paths climb up to the mountains. If we can imagine being teleported to the wishing pool and being the size of one of the original statues, we can understand how this design is a perfect garden at this size. The design would have created an impression of “being lost” in nature. The element of concealment and surprise would have been overwhelmingly present. The viewing experience would have been just like the unrolling of a scroll painting, revealing new elements as we move forward. Following the long winding path, we would not have known what to expect. We would have been constantly astonished and in a state of anticipation, wondering what else we would discover. Seeing this creation on a black and white photograph, even though we can visualize Kay’s artwork all at once, also gives a strong impression that examining it closely will constantly disclose new uncovering.

### **3.3 The Re-Created Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool**

The re-creation of the Seven Star Crag on a smaller scale in Los Angeles has multiple implications. First, as we have noted before, it represented home for the Chinese immigrants, since the original site lies in their Chinese birthplace. The immigrants could also use this replica to show their children what their homeland looked like. Yet the most significant Chinese meaning of the Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool is potentially its implied divine function. Mountains surrounded by water have a strong implication of being the residence of the immortals and by rendering them in miniature; Kay captured its essence as a sacred landscape. The miniature garden was endowed with “magical powers,” which could permit the immigrants to magically “gain access” to its original form in China.<sup>13</sup>

The sight of the Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool would certainly have astounded Americans visiting Chinatown. It likely did not bear any resemblance to other wishing pools that they could have seen previously. At the very least, they were nothing like the traditional Greco-Roman sculpture standing in the middle of water and, sometimes, from which water poured. Just like the children of Chinese immigrants, they would have marveled at the environment. The fact that it was called a “miniature replica” of an existing Chinese landscape may have potentially excited their curiosity and made them want to, at least someday, visit this wonderland. A 1940 black and white photograph shows many Caucasian people standing in awe in front of the caverns.

### **4. The Significance of the Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool**

Nowadays, Kay’s creation has changed dramatically. The size of the pool has shrunk and the vegetation is not as lush as it used to be. There is a building behind the wishing pool giving it a main viewing point as it is not to be viewed from all sides anymore. Bamboo, traditionally used in Chinese garden as a simile for the perfect gentleman who bends with the wind yet doesn’t break, is planted in between the building and the now backside of the mountains. The pool is surrounded by children’s rides, which unfortunately conflict with the probable intended peacefulness of the creation. Statues are now scattered around and, apart from two large Buddha statues and two pagodas, the mostly headless others are not recognizable figures. Merchants around Central Plaza informed me that they, themselves, donated statues when previous ones were broken from tourists throwing coins. The statues they donated have no special meaning, as they gave whatever they had available. Small signs inscribed with health, long life, luck, money, love, lotto, vacation are scattered on the caverns, and small vessels positioned in front of each sign inform the visitors how to make their wishes to come true. I have

noticed in each subsequent visit to Chinatown that people are trying diligently to reach their chosen target-an exercise often resulting in a plethora of coins laying disorderly within the creation.

Even though the Seven Star Caverns Wishing Pool is mostly in disrepair, the main rockery element is still present, and there are traces left of the winding paths curving up to the top. The caves are also still visible, yet it lacks all the intricate “busyness” it used to have. The mountains have been painted in a greenish blue color-perhaps to make up for its lack of vegetation and render it more like a blue-green landscape painting, so prominent in Chinese art. Instead of just a pond there is now a waterfall pouring out from the central, highest peak. Even though there is an impression of sadness-a remnant of what is was previously-people appear to enjoy the pool. Clearly, though, it does not have the same significance as it did previously. It is a transition that was to be expected since the Chinatown population has changed. The newly Chinese immigrants come from all over China, so the Seven Star Crag does not hold the same “birthplace” meaning. The Chinese that have been there for several generations have adapted to western American society and do not necessarily know the importance of the representation of “mountain and water”. Chinatown is also becoming a very “hip” neighborhood filled with modern-art galleries that attract American residents as well.

The Seven Star Caverns has changed function. The shortage of explanation on Kay’s creation probably explains its alteration. It evolved at the same time as Chinatown and its inhabitants. Even though, as I have previously stated, people enjoy the pond, it has lost its spiritual connectedness. Sadly, because people did not understand the value of the original miniature replica, an important piece of culture has been forgotten. However, Jody Hummer, an American woman responsible for filming in Chinatown, has taken the subject to heart, as she unexpectedly came across older pictures and footages of the pond that show it close to its initial appearance.

## 5. Conclusion

The Seven Star Caverns began as a Chinese subject made by a Chinese artist. Slowly the Chinese significance fell into oblivion as the population, either newly immigrated Chinese, American-Chinese, Americans, or any visitors, were blind to its value. The pool, however, is about to come full circle as a Chinese-American piece of art; an American woman, fascinated by this initial culture, is undertaking the task of restoring the pond. I will gladly observe the transformation of the Seven Stars Caverns and cannot help but hope that there will be a plaque explaining the significance of the Chinese gardens and of the mountain and water elements that have been so central to Chinese culture for centuries, if not millennia.

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