

# JAPANESE BUDDHISM — ITS IMPRINT ON A CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPE

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Of the many dynamic forces operating to bring about modification or transformation of an existing cultural landscape, one of the most interesting and important is that of man's religions. Although it is sometimes difficult to separate the religious component from ethnic, social or economic factors in our urbanized and secular Western society, it can be accomplished with a moderate amount of effort if one knows what to look for and can understand what he sees. The most obvious religious elements, such as churches, great monuments and other sacred places, may stand out even to the untutored eye, but these are marks of the "outer face" of an organized, institutionalized religion. It can, perhaps, be more rewarding to discover visible manifestations of the religious intensity of the individual member of the faith under study. In this investigation, the question is: Have the Japanese Buddhists in the United States managed to produce any imprint on the cultural landscape that can be identified as a religious one?

## JAPANESE CULTURE ELEMENTS

It does not take the investigator long to discover that there is a certain unity to all elements of Japanese culture. This unity stems from their forms of Buddhism, forms that call upon man to become an active participant in the workings of the universe. Whether it is in architecture, painting, flower arranging or in the landscaping of gardens, the desire to be an integral partner in the universe demands that the individual see beyond the mere outward form of an object, and to see, instead, the "essence" or "soul" of the work. It is perhaps less difficult for the non-Japanese to understand this concept by contemplating Japanese architecture. One American architect, noting that Americans tend to see only the physical qualities of a structure, commented that the Japanese are also concerned with the beauty of the grain of even the commonest of woods and have brought simpler lines to American architecture today.<sup>1</sup>

The most common examples of the influence of Japanese Buddhism on American architecture can be observed in the number of "bungalows" erected during the early 1920's which displayed the curving roof lines and ornate entrance arches of Buddhist temples. Portions of the "middle zone" of metropolitan Los Angeles abound with these old residences which gained inspiration from earlier Japanese participation in expositions and world fairs after the turn of the century. More common today are residences mistakenly termed "Hawaiian Modern." While the design may have come from Hawaii, the concept came out of the large Japanese population in the Islands.

The desire of the Japanese to maintain a strict simplicity in works of art—paintings, flower arrangements and sculptures—is well appreciated by non-Japanese. It is a common occurrence today for American housewives to embrace the Japanese form of flower arrangement called *ikebana* and to go to great lengths to gather unusual specimens of rocks, driftwood and unique weeds to be combined with longstemmed flowers in order to create a truly different design for coffee table or mantelpiece. This practice appears to have evolved from the centuries old custom of Japanese Buddhists to place an offering to Gautama the Buddha on an altar—in the form of a simple floral arrangement.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most admired, yet least understood of all the influences of Japanese Buddhism in the United States is the “Japanese Garden.” Most white Americans, even those who may have one in their own yard, mistakenly believe the garden is purely *ethnic* in origin. In reality, however, the Japanese garden is a definite religious manifestation. Although there can be no denying its Japanese origin, its present form is Buddhist in both design and inner meaning.<sup>3</sup>

## THE JAPANESE BUDDHIST GARDEN

These gardens—which have evolved over a span of more than a thousand years as Buddhism traveled from India to China and Korea to Japan—are most commonly seen gracing the front yards of Japanese homes. There is also a large percentage of religious gardens in patio areas that cannot be observed from the street. They contain certain elements that have a definite religious symbology, an understanding of which enhances the view of the gardens.

All religions have some concept of a force *outside* the person, but the Japanese Buddhist attempts to have this cosmos close to him, around and about him, so that he can truly feel he is a part of it. The Buddhist garden is a complex work of art, yet its beauty is derived from its inner meaning, its symbolism, its seeming simplicity. The Buddhist religious garden is a universe in miniature—nature compressed and idealized into a symbolic form that is supposed to be nearer perfection than nature in its original form.<sup>4</sup> The garden provides the Buddhist with a place for contemplation and for communion with nature and one’s own soul. In other words, it is an aid in following the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>5</sup>

Most Buddhist gardens stem from designs created during the sixteenth century by the master landscape designer, Soami, for the great Buddhist temples of Kyoto and Nara in Japan. His gardens complied with his demand that everything be to scale and be even more perfect than nature itself (Figure 1).

Foremost of the symbolic elements in the Buddhist Garden is the “Guardian Stone.” This large stone represents the “abode of the gods”—the Immortals—the great mountain from which, according to the legend, the gods descended to greet the newborn Siddhartha Gautama in Lumbini Gardens, India. To some, the mountain also represents the universe itself—a concept shared by many religions as exemplified by the importance attributed to such mountains as Mt. Sinai, Mt. Olympus, and the sacred mountain of the pre-Buddhist Japanese Fujiyama.

There are other stones, of course, and each has a specific meaning: the “waiting stone,” the “Companion stone” and so on. These stones symbolize certain attributes an individual should attempt to attain.<sup>6</sup> Special groupings of rocks and stones become a realistic duplication of nature’s beauty.

There are trees and shrubs and the most important of these is the Japanese Black Pine (*Pinus thunbergii*), *koru matsu*, which symbolizes long life. When these are planted in twos, it symbolizes a man and his wife growing old together. Sometimes there are ball-shaped shrubs pruned to simulate hills receding into the distance.

There is usually a stone lantern (*toro*) to shed light for nighttime strolls or a stone pagoda which represents the Indian *stupa*, a marker showing the burial place of a Bodhisatva, one who had attained Buddhahood.

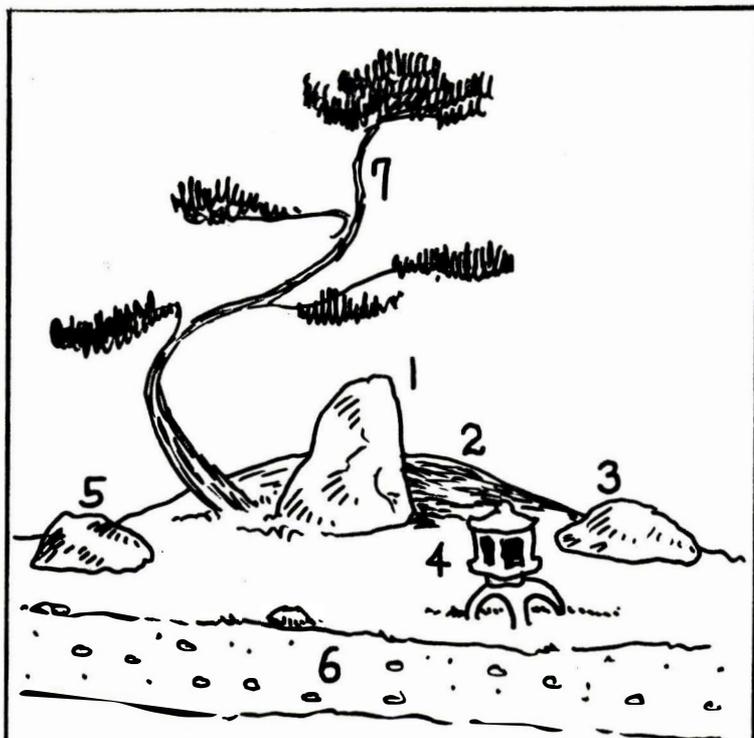


FIGURE 2. TYPICAL BUDDHIST GARDEN IN SAWTELLE, Calif.

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 -- Guardian Stone      | 4 -- Stone Lantern            |
| 2 -- Hill                | 5 -- Companion Stone          |
| 3 -- Companion Stone     | 6 -- Path or Simulated Stream |
| 7 -- Japanese Black Pine |                               |

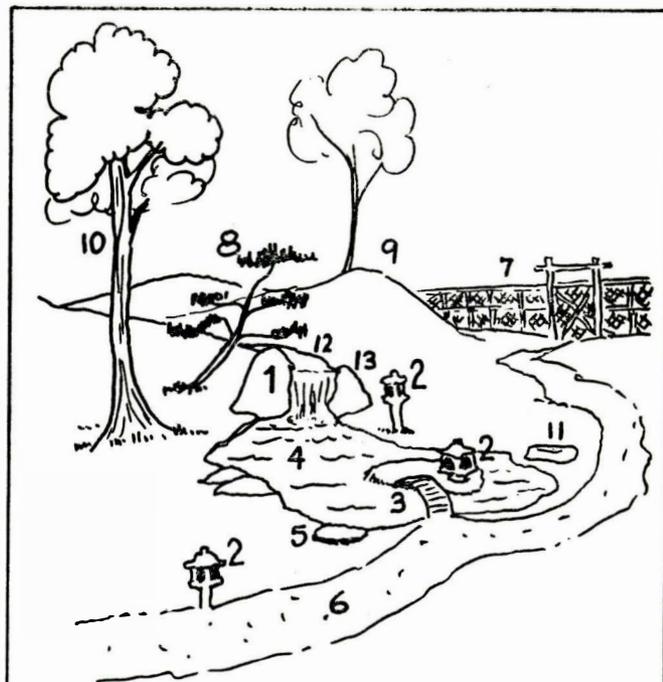


FIGURE 1. SHIN-STYLE BUDDHIST HILL GARDEN

- |                       |                              |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 -- Guardian Stone   | 7 -- Bamboo Fence            |
| 2 -- Stone Lantern    | 8 -- Koru Matsu              |
| 3 -- Bridge           | 9 -- Main Hill               |
| 4 -- Pond             | 10 -- Tree of Upright Spirit |
| 5 -- Idling Stone     | 11 -- Seat of Honor Stone    |
| 6 -- Pathway          | 12 -- Waterfall              |
| 13 -- Companion Stone |                              |

Source: Julia S. Berrall, *The Garden* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), Chapter XIII, pp. 360-362.

The amount of space available to the average Buddhist garden determines how many of the symbolic elements will appear, but the average American Japanese Buddhist will have placed in his garden certain basic elements: the Guardian Stone, the Black Pine, a lantern or a pagoda and a few of the important stones (Figure 2).

## A CASE STUDY: THE IMPRINT OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM IN SAWTELLE

A brief survey of the sub-community of Sawtelle, California, which is located about twelve miles west of downtown Los Angeles and six miles from Santa Monica Bay, might lead one to believe that it is a Japanese community. Such is not the case, however, for the Japanese total only 1,950, about twenty percent of the total population. The centripetal force exerted by the West Los Angeles Buddhist Church is so powerful that any available house put up for sale is almost immediately "snapped up" by Japanese desirous of entering the area. There is an ethnic shopping center (Figure 3) on Sawtelle Blvd., between La Grange and Mississippi, that caters primarily to the local Japanese, yet manages to do a considerable amount of business with non-Japanese who will travel long distances to shop for "Oriental delicacies." Although the Japanese in this area are engaged in almost every form of economic activity and occupation, one of the predominant occupations is that of landscape gardening. So successful are these gardeners—whose territory encompasses most of the western reaches of the Los Angeles lowland—that their annual income is higher than that of Japanese elsewhere in the state.<sup>7</sup> A number of nurseries supply these gardeners with their materials, but many of the Japanese also have their own "backyard" nurseries (usually along the side of the house in the form of shrubs and small trees neatly potted and awaiting transplanting). The nurseries as well as the Japanese population cluster about the Buddhist Church (Figure 4) and its neighbor, the West Los Angeles Community Methodist Church, an exclusively Japanese church also. An examination of the architecture of the two churches discloses the fact that they are quite similar in design, except for the Cross on the Methodist Church and the Buddhist Wheel of Life on the other.

The cultural imprint of the Japanese in Sawtelle is enhanced by the prevalence of the religious gardens (Figure 5). There are over one hundred of these gardens in the study area, and eighty percent are owned by Japanese who are Buddhist. Comparison of the location of the gardens with membership rosters of both the West Los Angeles Buddhist Church and the Community Methodist Church disclosed the fact that twenty-six of the gardens were owned by Japanese Methodists. The oddity of this fact was explained by a Buddhist gardener who said that he had "free rein" when asked by a Methodist to construct a "Japanese" garden. Although none of these gardens can compare to those of Kyoto or Nara in Japan, or to the elaborate ones on the various Hawaiian Islands, or even to the one belonging to the University of California at Los Angeles, they contain most of the important features of the authentic garden. The most accurate representation of Sawtelle's religious gardens is, appropriately enough, found at the Buddhist Church. It was designed by a landscape gardener who had studied under Buddhist priests in Kyoto.

Because most of the gardens in Japan (other than those of the temples) do not have running water, the majority of the Sawtelle gardens also eliminate actual streams. In the manner of a dry garden (Figure 6), the water is simulated by white sand; the waterfall by white rocks; thus evoking the idea of water bubbling over a small cliff and

winding its way through the garden. In some of the gardens, tree ferns have been added and the shrubs have been trimmed to represent hills receding into the distance.

Some of the homes have two gardens: one is the traditional Shin-style garden (Figure 7) and the other may be the mystical and unpretentious "tea garden" symbolical of the birth of the Buddha. The Tea Garden gave rise to the elaborate "tea ceremony" in Japan: the pouring of the tea emblematic of the bathing of the baby by the Immortals.

The residence of the Buddhist priest is shown in Figure 8. This garden has its pathway (or stream) made of concrete in which small pebbles have been placed. Because Sawtelle is headquarters for the sect of Buddhism known as Jodo Shinshu, it was surprising to find a Zen Buddhist garden (Figure 9) in the Sawtelle area. It was learned, however, that the congregation of the Buddhist church is composed of members from many different sects (Nichiren, Shingon, Soto Zen and others) who attend the West Los Angeles Church rather than make the long journey via the freeways to their own denomination's meeting places. This particular Zen garden appeared a trifle overgrown, with too many shrubs in evidence. The authentic Zen garden eschews such complexity: attempting only to portray the Guardian Stone, the abode of the Immortals, surrounded by the "ocean of the universe" represented by carefully raked white sand.

## CONCLUSION

It would be interesting and rewarding to make additional studies of similar Japanese Buddhist enclaves in other parts of California or the Pacific Coast. Perhaps similar religious manifestations may be found in London, Brazil, or wherever there may be a large concentration of Japanese Buddhists. Other than a Buddhist temple, would the prime manifestation of religiosity be the religious garden?

Perhaps there may be other demonstrations of their faith, but it is doubtful whether any will have the emotional impact of the contemplative beauty of the true Buddhist garden.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Clay Lancaster, *Japanese Influence in America* (New York: Rawls, 1963), p. 264.

<sup>2</sup>Yuki Yamamoto, *Approach to Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: The Japan Times for the Society for International Cultural Relations, 1961), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>For information as to the meaning of Japanese Buddhist gardens, see: Jiro Harada, *The Gardens of Japan* (London: The Studio Ltd., 1928); Lorraine Kuck, *The World of the Japanese Garden* (New York: Walker/Weatherhill, 1968); David Engel, "The Meaning of the Japanese Garden," *Landscape*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 11-14.

<sup>4</sup>Yamamoto, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup>Among the pathway steps are such attributes as right belief, right aspiration, right speech, and so forth. Important to the Buddhists, however, are right contemplation and right thought. The garden is one way to attain the right attitude, to rid one's mind of extraneous and misleading abstractions.

<sup>6</sup>Harriet O. Taylor, *Japanese Gardens* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1929), pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup>Fair Employment Practices Division, *Californians of Japanese, Chinese and Filipino Ancestry* (Sacramento and San Francisco: California Department of Industrial Relations, 1965), p. 14. Median Annual Income for Japanese in 1959 was \$4,388. According to reputable sources in the Sawtelle community, the 1968 median was about \$7,200. Even allowing for increases due to inflation, there is strong evidence that the Japanese in Sawtelle rank higher than Japanese in other parts of the state.



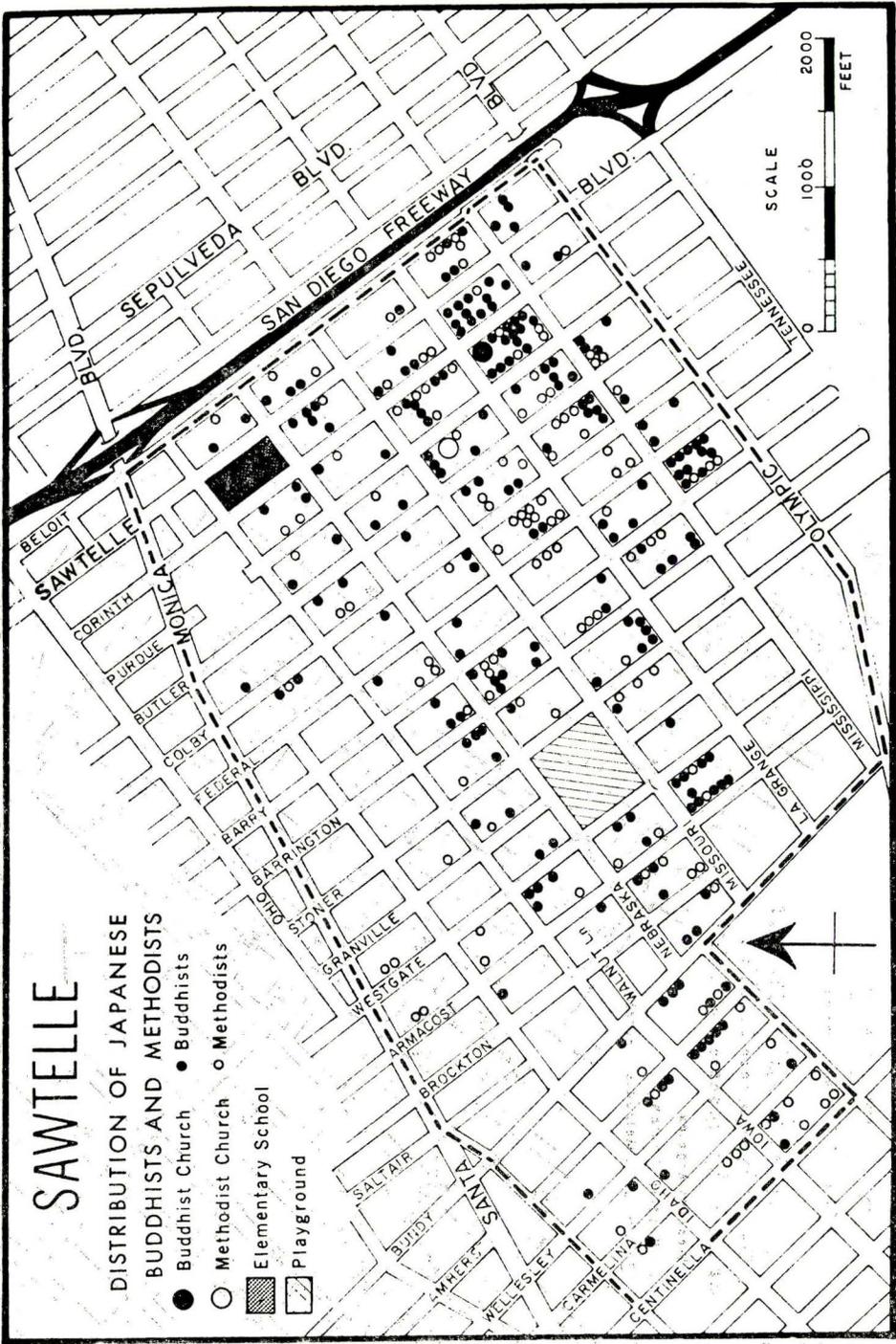


Figure 4. Distribution of Japanese Buddhists and Methodists in Sawtelle.

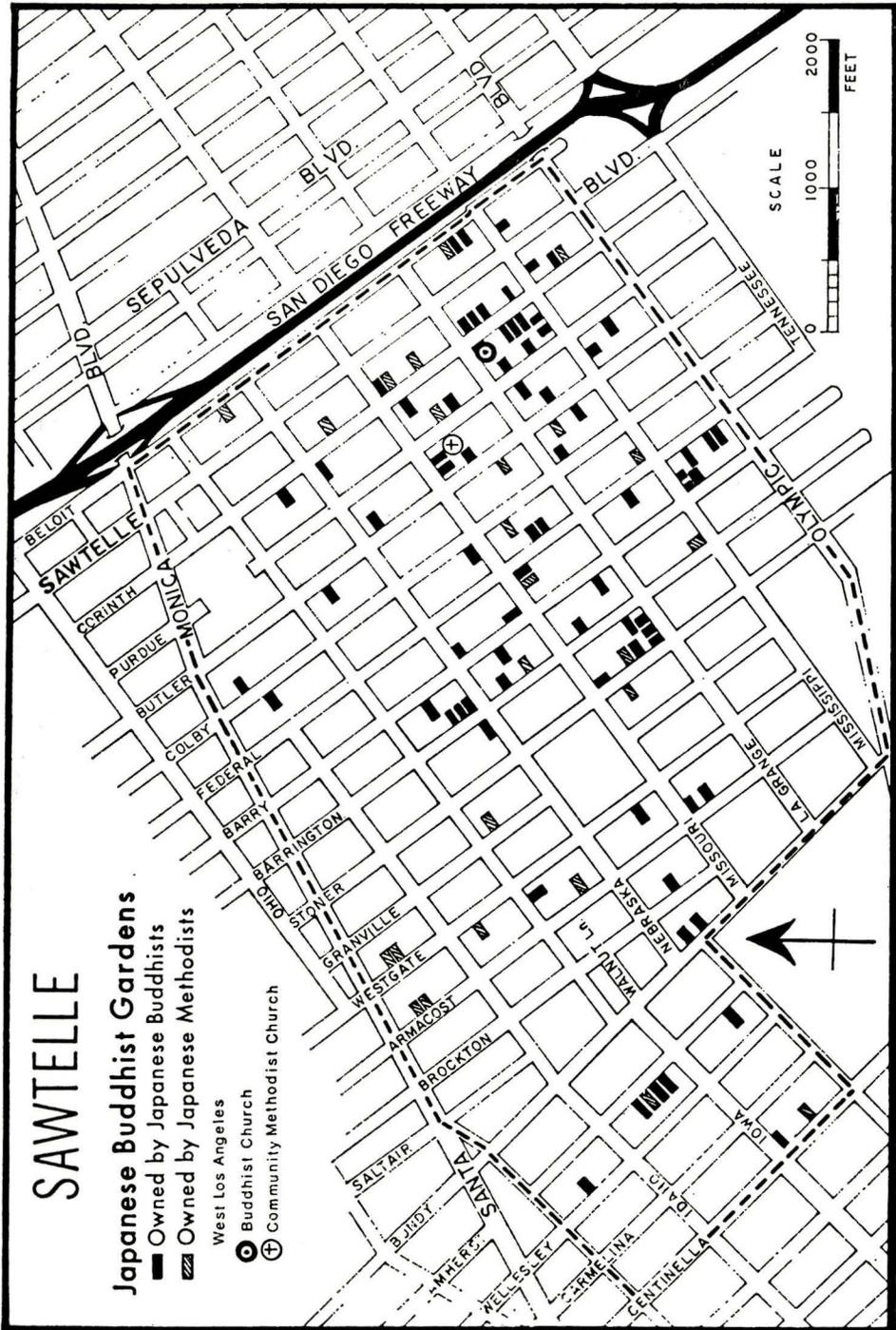


Figure 5. Distribution of Japanese Buddhist Gardens in Sawtelle.



Figure 6. Dry Garden



Figure 7. Shin-style Garden



Figure 8. Residence of Buddhist Priest

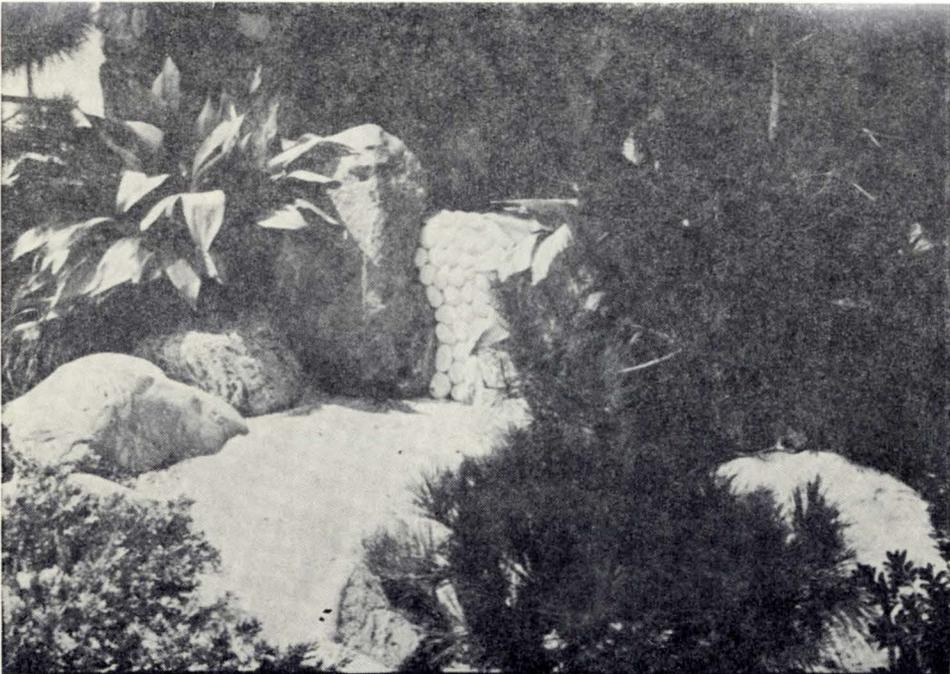


Figure 9. Zen Buddhist Garden