

# Penjing: The Chinese Art of Bonsai

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**Summary.** More and more people have become very interested in bonsai, a unique art of gardening that originated in China. However, most people know about Japanese bonsai and have only scant knowledge of Chinese bonsai. This paper gives a brief introduction to the history, local schools, and patterns of the bonsai art in the Chinese tradition, as well as a list of plants used for bonsai in China.

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Some misconceptions in horticultural history are very interesting, such as *Prunus mume* Sieb et Zucc., one of the famous 10 traditional flowers in China. Although it originated in China, it was given the common name “Japanese Apricot” by Westerners because they obtained the plant from Japan, and thought it native there. Similarly, most Westerners mistakenly credited bonsai to Japan.

## The history of bonsai

Bonsai originated in China. It dates back to ancient times in the history of China. As early as the Yin and Zhou Dynasties, more than 3000 years ago, the Chinese began to cultivate ornamental plants and to pattern gardens after natural scenery. According to archaeological findings, potted flowers found in a mural in an Eastern Han Dynasty (A.D. 25-220) tomb in Wangdu County, Hebei Province, have been recognized as the embryonic form of bonsai by most experts in China.

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The formative stage of bonsai took place during the Wei and Jin Dynasties (A.D. 220-420), when the strong influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism resulted in the social mode of upholding simplicity and elegance, and expressing sentiment in landscape. Confucius said, “The wise find pleasure in water, the virtuous find pleasure in hills” (*Analects*). Thus, like landscape painting and poems in China, summarized as *Shan Shui*, or “mountains” and “water,” Chinese bonsai is made of not only plants, but also of rocks and water, because it attempts to approach and display in symbolic form the essence of nature. This is not a realistic or naturalistic presentation, but one that seeks to find the “nature of nature.” It is for this reason that bonsai was given a precise name “*penjing*” (potted landscape) by Chinese experts.

Bonsai matured in the early Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907). A mural vividly depicting a maid of honor holding a potted landscape in her hands has been found in the tomb of Crown Prince Zhang Huai of the early Tang Dynasty, which was built in 706 in Qianxian County, Shanxi Province. We can learn a great deal from the poems of the Tang Dynasty; the artistic forms of potted landscape were stressed and various styles had already emerged.

The Northern Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279) saw unprecedented development in the art of painting, which, in turn, fostered the penjing art. Enjoying fantastic trees and grotesque stones became a common fad at that time. The famous Song paintings of “Eighteen Scholars,” together with many poems and writings, indicate that the penjing art was well on its way toward perfection, and that two major kinds of penjing had evolved: mountain-and-water penjing and tree penjing. The latter was quite similar to that of modern penjing.

Chinese penjing flourished in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (A.D. 1368-1911). A study of relevant documents and extant penjing works shows that

Table 1. *Bonsai plants in China.*

<i>Acer buergerianum</i> Miq.	<i>Diospyros armata</i> Hemsl.	<i>Pinus armandii</i> Franch
<i>Acer japonicum</i> Thunb. var. <i>aconitifolium</i> Meehan	<i>Diospyros kaki</i> L.f.	<i>Pinus bungeana</i> Zucc. ex. Endl.
<i>Acer mono</i> Maxim.	<i>Diospyros rhombifolia</i> Hemsl.	<i>Pinus parviflora</i> Siebold & Zucc.
<i>Acer palmatum</i> Thunb.	<i>Ebretia microphylla</i> Lam.	<i>Pinus taiwanensis</i> Hayata
<i>Adina rubella</i> Hance	<i>Elacagnus pungens</i> Thunb.	<i>Pinus thunbergii</i> Parl.
<i>Akebia quinata</i> (Houtt.) Decne.	<i>Enkianthus quinqueflora</i> Lour.	<i>Pistacia chinensis</i> Bunge
<i>Ampelopsis aconitifolia</i> Bunge.	<i>Euonymus alatus</i> (Thunb.) Siebold	<i>Pleiblastus argenteo-striatus</i> (Regel) Nakai
<i>Ardisia crenata</i> Sims	<i>Euonymus bungeanus</i> Maxim.	<i>Podocarpus macrophyllus</i> (Thunb.) D. Don
<i>Ardisia japonica</i> (Hornst.) blume.	<i>Euonymus fortunei</i> (Turcz) Hand.-Mazz.	<i>Podocarpus macrophyllus</i> (Thunb.) D. Don var. <i>maki</i> Endl.
<i>Bambusa multiplex</i> (Lour.) Rauschel.	<i>Fatsia japonica</i> (Thunb.) Decne.	<i>Podocarpus nagi</i> (Thunb.) Zoll & Moritz ex Mak.
<i>Bambusa multiplex</i> (Lour.) Rauschel 'Nana'	<i>Ficus microcarpa</i> Hugel ex Kunth & Bouche	<i>Prunus cerasifera</i> J.F. Ehrh.
<i>Bambusa ventricosa</i> McClure	<i>Ficus pumila</i> L.	<i>Prunus japonica</i> Thunb.
<i>Berberis poiretii</i> C.K. Schneid.	<i>Fortunella crassifolia</i> Swingle	<i>Prunus mume</i> Siebold & Zucc.
<i>Berberis thunbergii</i> DC	<i>Fortunella margarita</i> (Lour.) Swingle	<i>Prunus persica</i> (L.) Batsch. 'Densa'
<i>Berberis thunbergii</i> DC 'Atropurpurea'	<i>Fraxinus chinensis</i> Roxb.	<i>Pseudolarix amabilis</i> (J. Nels.) Rehd.
<i>Buxus harlandii</i> Hance	<i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> Ellis	<i>Punica granatum</i> L.
<i>Buxus microphylla</i> Siebold & Zucc. var. <i>sinica</i> Rehd & E.H. Wils.	<i>Ginkgo biloba</i> L.	<i>Pyracantha fortuneana</i> (Maxim.) H.L. Li
<i>Camellia japonica</i> L.	<i>Glyptostrobus pensilis</i> (D. Don) C. Koch	<i>Rhamnus parvifolia</i> Bunge
<i>Camellia sasanqua</i> Thunb.	<i>Hedera helix</i> L. 'Marginata'	<i>Rhaphis humilis</i> Blume.
<i>Campsis grandiflora</i> (Thunb.) K. Schum.	<i>Hedera nepalensis</i> C. Koch	<i>Rhaphis mutifida</i> Henry
<i>Caragana sinica</i> (Buc'hoz) Rehd.	<i>Ilex chinensis</i> Sims.	<i>Rhododendron</i> L. spp.
<i>Carmona microphylla</i> (Lam.) G. Don.	<i>Ilex cornuta</i> Lindl.	<i>Rhus sylvestris</i> Siebold & Zucc.
<i>Celastrus orbiculatus</i> Thunb.	<i>Ilex crenata</i> Thunb.	<i>Rosa chinensis</i> Jacq.
<i>Celtis sinensis</i> Pers.	<i>Jasminum floridum</i> Bunge.	<i>Sabina chinensis</i> (L.) Antoine
<i>Cephalotaxus sinensis</i> (Rehd. & E. H. Wils.) H.L. Li	<i>Jasminum mesnyi</i> Hance	<i>Sabina chinensis</i> (L.) Antoine 'Aurea'
<i>Cercis chinensis</i> Bunge	<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i> Lindl.	<i>Sabina chinensis</i> (L.) Antoine var. <i>sargentii</i> Cheng et L.K. Fu
<i>Chaenomeles cathayensis</i> (Hemsl.) C.K. Schneid.	<i>Juniperus communis</i> L.	<i>Sabina procumbens</i> (Endl.) Iwata et Kusata
<i>Chaenomeles speciosa</i> (Sweet) Nakai	<i>Juniperus formosana</i> Hayata.	<i>Sabina squamata</i> (Buch.-Ham.) Ant. 'Meyeri'
<i>Chamaecyparis obtusa</i> (Siebold & Zucc.) Endl. 'Breviramea'	<i>Juniperus rigida</i> Siebold & Zucc.	<i>Sageretia theezans</i> (L.) Brongn
<i>Chamaecyparis obtusa</i> (Siebold & Zucc.) Endl. 'Filicoides'	<i>Kalopanax septemlobus</i> (Thunb.) Koidz.	<i>Sasa auricomma</i> Mak. & Shib.
<i>Chamaecyparis pisifera</i> (Siebold & Zucc.) Endl. 'Filifera'	<i>Lagerstroemia indica</i> L.	<i>Schefflera octophylla</i> (Lour.) Harms.
<i>Chamaecyparis pisifera</i> (Siebold & Zucc.) Endl. 'Squarrosa'	<i>Ligustrum sinense</i> Lour.	<i>Schisandra chinensis</i> (Turcz.) Baill.
<i>Chimonanthus praecox</i> (L.) Link	<i>Liquidambar formosana</i> Hance.	<i>Sciadopitys verticillata</i> Siebold & Zucc.
<i>Citrus aurantium</i> L. var. <i>amara</i> Engl.	<i>Lonicera japonica</i> Thunb.	<i>Serissa foetida</i> (L.F.) Lam.
<i>Citrus medica</i> L. var. <i>sarcodactylis</i> (Noot.) Swingle	<i>Loropetalum chinense</i> (R.Br.) D. Oliver	<i>Spiraea cantoniensis</i> Lour.
<i>Citrus reticulata</i> Blanco	<i>Loropetalum chinense</i> (R. Br.) D. Oliver. var. <i>rubrum</i> Yieh	<i>Spiraea japonica</i> L.f.
<i>Cotinus coggygria</i> Scop.	<i>Lycium chinense</i> Mill.	<i>Syringa pubescens</i> Turcz.
<i>Cotoneaster horizontalis</i> Decne	<i>Magnolia liliflora</i> Desr.	<i>Syzygium buxifolium</i> Hook. et Arn.
<i>Cotoneaster microphyllus</i> Wallich ex Lindl.	<i>Mahonia fortunei</i> (Lindl.) Fedde.	<i>Tamarix chinensis</i> Lour.
<i>Crataegus pinnatifida</i> Bunge	<i>Malus asiatica</i> Nakai	<i>Taxodium ascendens</i> Brongn.
<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i> (L.f.) D. Don. 'Vilmoriniana'	<i>Malus halliana</i> Koehne	<i>Taxodium distichum</i> (L.) L. Rich
<i>Cupressus funebris</i> Endl.	<i>Malus prunifolia</i> (Willd.) Borkh.	<i>Taxus chinensis</i> (Pilg.) Rehd. var. <i>mairei</i> Cheng et L.K. Fu
<i>Cycas revoluta</i> Thunb.	<i>Malus pumila</i> Mill.	<i>Taxus cuspidata</i> Siebold & Zucc.
<i>Cycas rumphii</i> Miq.	<i>Malus spectabilis</i> (Ait.) Borkh.	<i>Taxus cuspidata</i> Siebold & Zucc. 'Nana'
<i>Cydonia sinensis</i> Thouin	<i>Metasequoia glyptostroboides</i> H.H. Hu & Cheng	<i>Ternstroemia gymnanthera</i> (Wight & Arn.) T. Sprague
<i>Damnacanthus indicus</i> C.F. Gaertn.	<i>Millettia reticulata</i> Benth	<i>Trachelospermum jasminoides</i> (Lindl.) Lem.
<i>Daphne genkwa</i> Siebold & Zucc.	<i>Nandina domestica</i> Thunb.	<i>Ulmus parvifolia</i> Jacq.
<i>Daphne odora</i> Thunb.	<i>Osmanthus fragrans</i> (Thunb.) Lour.	<i>Vitex negundo</i> L.
	<i>Osmanthus heterophyllus</i> (G. Don) P.S. Green	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> L.
	<i>Parthenocissus tricuspidata</i> (Siebold & Zucc.) Planch	<i>Wisteria sinensis</i> (Sims) Sweet
	<i>Phyllostachys bambusoides</i> Siebold & Zucc. 'Tanakae'	<i>Wisteria sinensis</i> (Sims) Sweet var. <i>alba</i> Lindl.
	<i>Phyllostachys nigra</i> (Lodd. ex Lindl.) Munro	<i>Xylosma japonicum</i> (Walp.) A. Gray
	<i>Picea asperata</i> M.T. Mast.	<i>Zelkova schneideriana</i> Hand.-Mazz.
	<i>Pieris japonica</i> (Thunb.) D. Don ex G. Don	

various artistic features were evident during that period, and that penjing works tended to embody pictorial conception and poetic flavor.

In the late years of the Qing Dynasty and thereafter, Chinese penjing declined for a time, but, in recent decades, it has rejuvenated and has been

developing considerably. Many new ideas and technical innovations based on the old traditions have found vivid expressions in the penjing art of today.



Fig. 1. *Bonsai pruned in the shape of layers of clouds* (*Taxus cuspidata* Sieb. et Zucc. cv. *Nana*).



Fig. 2. *Bonsai of maidenhair tree* (*Ginkgo biloba* L.).

As mentioned previously, we can see that penjing, as a particular kind of gardening, is closely tied with landscape painting and poetry in China. Indeed, the three arts of poetry, landscape painting, and penjing are thought of as interdependent, each requiring an understanding of the others, with proficiency in each necessary to achieve proficiency in any one. Thus, penjing art is called “silent poetry, three-dimensional painting” in China. It has already become an integral part of the Chinese peoples’ leisure cultures.

It was during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 1127-1279) that Chinese bonsai art found its way to Japan, where it was then introduced into the continents of Europe, America, and Australia at the beginning of the 20th century. So far, it has become a worldwide art with different styles, such as Japanese, English, and American (e.g., “Pompon”), etc. Plants used in Chinese bonsai are listed in Table 1.

### The local schools of bonsai art in china

The bonsai art is now spreading throughout the whole country, especially in eastern, central, and southern China, where the climate is mild and wet. China has vast territories, distinguished and varied local scenery, and material resources (plants and rocks) for bonsai, all of which, along with different aesthetic standards and techniques of bonsai-making, make it ready for forming various local schools of bonsai art. The main local schools of bonsai in China are as follows:

**Yangzhou Penjing.** Representative trees of this genre are pine (*Pinus* L.), cypress (*Cupressus* L.), Chinese elm (*Ulmus parvifolia* Jacq.), and Chinese littleleaf box (*Buxus microphylla* Siebold & Zucc. var. *sinca* Rehd. & E.H. Wils.), which are meticulously wired with palm fibers and carefully



Fig. 3. *Bonsai of pomegranate* (*Punica granatum* L.).



Fig.4. *Straight trunk pattern* (*Ulmus parvifolia* Jacq.).

pruned in the shape of layers of clouds (Fig. 1). Yangzhou tree penjing best expresses sobriety and elegance. Mountain-and-water penjing as well as water-and-land penjing has many forms that appear to give both poetic and picturesque effects.

**Suzhou penjing.** Known for its classic beauty, Suzhou tree penjing employs Chinese elm, hedge sageretia [*Sageretia theezans* (L.) Brongn.], trident maple (*Acer buergeranum* Miq.), and plum (*Prunus* L.) for themes. Training methods are mostly rough wiring with meticulous pruning to shape branches like clusters of clouds.

**Sichuan penjing.** Trees such as Buddhist pine [*Podocarpus macrophyllus* (Thunb.) D. Don], maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba* L.) (Fig. 2), spiny persimmon (*Diospyros armata* Hemsl.), snow-in-summer [*Serissa foetida* (L.F.) Lam.], and flowering quince



Fig. 5. *Slanting trunk pattern* [*Podocarpus macrophyllus* (Thunb.) D. Don var. *maki* Endl.].



Fig. 6. *Twisted trunk pattern* [*Podocarpus macrophyllus* (Thunb.) D. Don var. *maki* Endl.].

[*Chaenomeles lagenaria* (Loisel.) G. Koidz.] often are seen in Sichuan tree penjing. Wiring with palm fibers and trimming shapes the branches and leaves into "plates" and makes the trunks expressively sinuous. Sichuan mountain-and-water penjing, as well as water-and-land penjing, is noted for serenity, grace, steepness, and majesty.

**Lingnan penjing.** Hedge sageretia, Chinese elm, orange jasmine (*Murraya paniculata* L. Jack), and Philippine tea (*Ehretia microphylla* Lam.) are typical penjing trees in this region. The chief method of training is to retain the branches, but cut the trunks so that the trees look old and hardy, natural, and graceful. The beautiful and fantastic mountain-and-water penjing is also very attractive.

**Shanghai penjing.** This metropolis boasts a large variety of trees (Fig. 3) for making penjing. They are tied with wires and pruned. Shanghai tree penjing is considered sprightly and vigorous. Miniature penjing is exquisite and mountain-and-water pen-

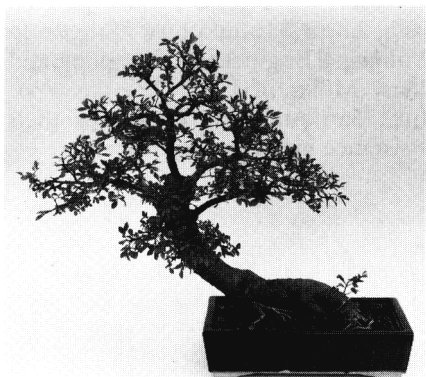


Fig. 7. *Recumbent trunk pattern* (*Ulmus parvifolia* Jacq.).



Fig. 8. *Withered trunk pattern* (*Vitex negundo* L.)

jing is a unique blend of grace and vigor.

**Huizhou tree penjing.** Plum, common juniper (*Juniperus communis* L.) and formosa pine (*Pinus taiwanensis* Hayata) are representative of Huizhou penjing trees. Rough wiring and rough pruning are typical Huizhou techniques for making tree penjing, which is known for its rusticity and grotesqueness.

**Zhejiang tree penjing.** Pine and cypress usually are collected, tied with either palm fibers or metal wires, and pruned to make Zhejiang tree penjing highly natural and picturesque in both form and spirit.

**Nantong tree penjing.** The tree mostly used for penjing is shrubby yew podocarpus [*Podocarpus macrophyllus* (Thunb.) D. Donvar. *maki* Endl.] Its trunk is wired with palm fibers into an "S" shape (two curves and a half) with branches pruned into clear-cut pieces.

Apart from those mentioned previously, schools of penjing in Fujian, Henan, Hubei, Nanjing, Hunan, Guizhou, and Xuzhou either have al-



Fig. 9. *Pattern of root attached to a rock* (*Ulmus parvifolia* Jacq.).



Fig. 10. *Overlooking pattern* [*Buxus sinica* (Rehd. et Wils.) Cheng ex M. Cheng].

ready developed or are still undergoing development with their own respective local characteristics.

### The patterns of Chinese bonsai

Bonsai (tree potted landscape) in the Chinese tradition are divided into the following patterns according to their shapes:

A) **Straight Trunk** (Fig. 4). The tree trunk grows erect and the branches spread in gradations, resembling a huge, towering tree in its natural setting. This pattern, in turn, can be divided into three subpatterns: 1) single trunk, 2) double trunk, and 3) multi-trunk (three or more).

B) **Slanting Trunk** (Fig. 5). The tree trunk inclines to one side. Several branches spread naturally on the top of the tree and look elegant.

C) **Twisted Trunk** (Fig. 6). The tree trunk is twisted to the left and right. The branches spread to both sides in clear gradations.

D) **Recumbent Trunk** (Fig. 7).



Fig. 11. *Linked roots pattern* (*Ligustrum sinense* Lour.).



Fig. 12. *Linked roots pattern* (*Diospyros armata* Hemsl.).

The tree trunk is recumbent along the surface of the soil and the crown of the tree is thrust upward.

E) Withered Trunk (Fig. 8). The main trunk is withered, but the branches and leaves are luxuriant, as if spring had come to a withered tree and it was brimming with vitality.

F) Root Attached to a Rock (Fig. 9). The tree roots grow on the rocks in a pot. The tree is either attached to a rock or stands in a rock crevice, resembling an age-old tree on a peak.

G) Overlooking (Fig. 10). The crown of the tree inclines to one side, just like that of a tree on the bank of a pond overlooking the water.



Fig. 13. *Overhanging pattern* [*Sageretia theezans* (L.) Brongn].



Fig. 14. *Diverse forest pattern* [*Pseudolarix amabilis* (Nels.) Rehd.].

H) Linked Roots (Figs. 11 and 12). The exposed roots of two or more trees are linked together. The trunks, at varying heights and in a charming, irregular array, have a special style.

I) Overhanging (Fig. 13). The tree trunk coils and bends downward and the branches overhang the pot,



Fig. 15. *Vine pattern* (*Lonicera japonica* Thunb.).

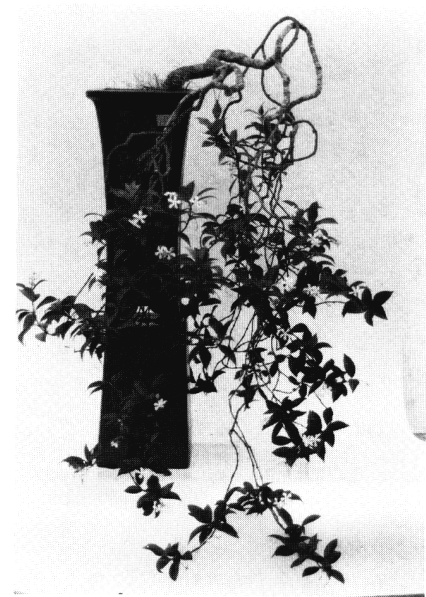


Fig. 16. *Vine pattern* [*Trachelospermum jasminoides* (Lindl.) Lem.].

just like age-old trees in rock crevices on precipices and sheer cliffs, defying danger and standing firm and tenacious. If the tree's top does not extend beyond the bottom of the pot, it is called a partially overhanging cliff pattern. If the tree's top overhangs to a very large degree and extends beyond the bottom of the pot, it is called a fully overhanging cliff pattern.

J) Diverse Forest (Fig. 14). Three or more trees are planted in a pot. Interspersed with overlapping shadows, they grow into lush woods and have the natural charms of the wilderness.

K) Vine (Figs. 15 and 16): The plants used for this type of bonsai are vines, such as wisterias, Japanese honeysuckle, star jasmine, etc.

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