

The garden where Aaron loved Lisa

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AILI Garden, once located on Hardoon Road, served as Silas Aaron Hardoon's private garden. Hardoon was a famous Jewish businessman in early 20th-century Shanghai.

Unfortunately, this charming garden, offering fascinating views from different angles, was unable to survive and after a prolonged process of dilapidation was completely ruined by 1945, with only a few decaying sheds scattered around.

The garden was rebuilt as the Sino-Soviet Friendship Mansion in 1955. Then after another large-scaled refurbishment, it became the Shanghai Exhibition Centre - now standing at 1,000 Yan'an Zhonglu. Although the extravagant garden no longer exists, the radical events that happened there - together with a long-standing folklore about the place - has meant the spot ranks among one of the most interesting sites in Shanghai.

Born in Baghdad in 1847 and raised in Bombay (now Mumbai), Hardoon came to Shanghai after a short stay in Hong Kong in 1873 and worked at David Sassoon & Sons Co. Taking advantage of his good relationship with Sassoon and his ingenuity, he entered the real estate business and became very successful, second only to his former boss. Later, he married a Chinese woman named Luo Jialing.

During its expansion in 1899, the International Settlement extended eastwards to the Jing'an Temple. Thus, the agile Hardoon moved quickly and bought a huge piece of land between today's Nanjing Xilu and Yan'an Zhonglu.

The garden had been designed by a famous monk named Huang Zongyang of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). It focused on the idea of "Chinese-style supplemented by Western fashion." The project was completed in 1909, combining inner and outer gardens.

The largest and the most extravagant private garden in Shanghai at that time, it was dotted with exquisitely carved rockeries, babbling brooks, resplendent and magnificent balconies and quaint pavilions - more than 60 scenic spots, each with an inscription written by a well-known calligrapher. Locals endowed it with the name "Shanghai's Grand View Garden".

The name Aili had the special implied meaning of "Aaron loves Lisa", (Lisa was Hardoon's wife's English name).

Serving not only as Hardoon's retreat, the garden was also used as a gathering place for social celebrities and big-wigs from political circles.

Hardoon had a great interest in the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century BC), on which he spent a lot of money and invited scholars such as Luo Zhenyu to conduct research into them. There's no denying Hardoon's efforts to cultivate experts on bone inscriptions in Shanghai.

And due to Mrs Hardoon's Buddhist religion, the first local Buddhist Institute, named Huayan, was established in the garden. Later, another was launched and named the Shengcangmingzhi Institute, which was among the most influential Buddhist institutions in contemporary China. Even Xu Beihong, the highly respected master of Chinese ink painting, was once a teacher there.

After the death of Haroon in 1931 and his widow in 1941, the garden suffered from careless management and fell into disrepair.

During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45) the garden was seized by Japanese troops who used it as an encampment. This, together with the outbreak of several fires, led to the total destruction of the garden. Vivian Wang

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