

## FEATURE

# James Dawson Talking About His Association with the Garden

James Dawson, **Architect, Dreamer/ Promoter-in-Chief of the Seattle Chinese Garden**

Yes, a Chinese garden in Seattle has been a dream of **James Dawson**, a founder of the Seattle Chinese Garden Society. But “garden” may be a misnomer. It is a project with an estimated cost of \$40 million, on 4.6 acres of land, with 15



structures on it, when completed, from pavilions to courtyards, from lakes to bridges, from a gathering hall to an education center, plus horticulture. It's more like a garden-park-cultural center in one. For this dream, James Dawson has been working for 25 years, and counting. If it sounds exhausting, that's only his part-time, non-profit work. To find out how he got started and more, from the very beginning, Wendy interviewed him on March 8, 2011 at the **Seattle Chinese Garden**, now partially built.

...

“Hooked on China and Chinese Gardens Since 1985” Wen: So you said you were with the Seattle trade delegation in China in 1986. But I

Excerpt from *James Dawson was Wen's Guest Today* (Mar. 14, 2011)  
<http://www.wensinterviews.us/WensGuestTodayDawson.html>  
The website of Wendy Liu

read that you first visited China in 1985. What was that trip?

**Jim:** I was with my dad, my wife, and brother.

**Wen:** It was a family one. Was it a tour?

**Jim:** It was basically a three-week tour, a small group. It started out Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, Xian, Guilin, Guangzhou.

**Wen:** At that time, you were not involved with the Seattle-Chongqing Sister City yet.

**Jim:** No.

**Wen:** Did you know about Washington State China Relations Council yet? They came into being in 1979.

**Jim:** Not at that time. So we went on this trip. I was astonished at what was going on in China.

**Wen:** It's said that you fell in love with Chinese gardens on the trip.

**Jim:** I didn't know what really to expect and was amazed by the gardens, especially in Suzhou. What really captured my imagination was the integration of all aspects of the culture. It wasn't just architecture. It wasn't just landscaping. It was all these other things. It was painting, calligraphy, music and poetry, rocks and water. You couldn't name a part of the culture that wasn't represented in the garden. It was also obvious to me that we didn't know very much about Chinese culture or Chinese gardens.

This trip in 1985 opened my eyes. I came back from that trip, thinking wow, we'd better learn something about this, because it's going to be a big part of our lives in the future, whether we like it or not.

**Wen:** So how did you get involved in the Sister City?

**Jim:** A few months after I got back, I heard that the Seattle Parks Department had just started to talk to our sister city Chongqing about the possibility of doing a Chinese garden in Seattle and a sister city trade mission to Chongqing being planned. So I signed up to be on the mission Mayor Charles Royer led. That was May of 86. .

**Wen:** Mayor Royer appointed a citizens committee to study the garden idea. Were you on the committee?

Jim: Yes. I was the chair of the committee. We were faced with a task of studying the feasibility, trying to find a site, trying to determine what would be in a Chinese garden in Seattle, what would it be like. It was Jan. of 90...

It's now 25 years since the Royer trip and the idea, 20 since the creation of the Society, and now with Song Mei Pavilion and Knowing the Spring Courtyard completed...

###

*Wendy Liu is an independent China business consultant, translator and writer, living in Seattle, WA. She has a BA in English from Xi'an Foreign Languages Institute in China and an MS in Technology and Science Policy from Georgia Institute of Technology in the US.*