

A Conversation on a Paradise on Earth in Eight Frames

Tordis Berstrand

University of Plymouth

Amir Djalali

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Yiping Dong

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Jiawen Han

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Teresa Hoskyns

CRAC UK

Siti Balkish Roslan

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Glen Wash Ivanovic

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Claudia Westermann

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University*

ABSTRACT | Once known as the city of silk, Suzhou 苏州 has become the centre of wedding dress production, selling paradise on earth for one day, including copies of the last royal wedding dress, out of shops at the foot of mythic Tiger Hill. Suzhou is also the host of what is known as the Silicon Valley of the East. It has attracted millions of migrants searching for a better future; millions of tourists visit every year to experience the past, strolling through the gardens and courtyards of its Old

* *Correspondence:* Claudia Westermann – Department of Architecture, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, 8 Chongwen Road, Suzhou 215123, Jiangsu Province, P.R.China. Email: Claudia.Westermann@xjtlu.edu.cn

Town. The contrasts could hardly be more apparent. Slow time, and fast time, and the time of the in-between, are woven into the city's complex spatial fabric. This is a conversation by eight authors in eight frames on a city that connects them.

KEYWORDS | City; Philosophy; China, Suzhou; Classical Gardens

Once called paradise on earth, famous for its gardens and its exquisite silk garments, historic Suzhou is kept alive in poetry and painting. Famous examples include the 18th-century scroll *Prosperous Suzhou* originally entitled *Burgeoning Life in a Resplendent Age*. The painting, commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor 乾隆帝, records life crossing the threshold into the modern age, in a traditional Chinese style that incorporates the Western perspective.



Figure 1: *Prosperous Suzhou* 姑苏繁华图 [Gūsū Fánhuá Tú], clipping, by Xu Yang 徐扬, 1759. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 35.8 x 1225 cm; Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang.

Today, Suzhou is one of China's most dynamic and rapidly developing cities. Suzhou is part of the Yangtze River Delta megalopolis, which accounts for a fifth of China's GDP. Once known as the city of silk it has become the centre of wedding dress production, selling paradise on earth for one day, including copies of the last royal wedding dress, out of shops at the foot of mythic Tiger Hill 虎丘 [Hǔqīū]. Suzhou is also the host of what is known as the Silicon Valley of the East. It has attracted millions of migrants searching for a better future; millions of tourists visit every year to experience the past, strolling through the gardens and courtyards of its Old Town. The contrasts could hardly be more apparent. Slow time, and fast time, and the time of the in-between, are woven into the city's complex spatial fabric.



Figure 2: *Suzhou Old Town*, photograph by Glen Wash Ivanovic.

Three of us are on site. Two have been locked out for a year. Two have never been there. Two have left. Each of us embodies a real/virtual pandemic position in relation to Suzhou. At the same time, there, not there, never there, no longer there. While speaking from a position there, in the real/virtual city that is Suzhou past/present/future.

This is a dialogue on a city that connects us.

From the extra-large (planetary urbanisation) to the small (the garden).

From the real to the imagined, and back again.

1 The Water Location

Voice 01, speaking from London, UTC +1

Situated in the centre of the Yangtze Delta region in the southwest of Jiangsu Province, Suzhou lies south of the Yangtze River to the west of one of China's largest freshwater lakes, Lake Tai. The city lies at a central point of the World Heritage-listed Grand Canal (established 581–618 C.E.) that flows from Hangzhou in the South to Beijing in the North and to the West of Suzhou's ancient city. This water location, on three mighty waters, meant that between the 13th and 19th centuries Suzhou was at the centre of water transportation in China. The ancient city is connected to Lake Tai via a river moat that surrounds the old city forming a fortified islet. The water enters the city through eight water gates into an orthogonally designed water grid. Suzhou is surrounded on all sides by a crisscross of canals and lakes. Philip Ball wrote in *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China* that the area "is so dense with waterways and small lakes that the map looks more like a cross-section through a sponge" (Ball 2017).

The waterways in the old city were designed with parallel streets with courtyard houses between the two. The traditional courtyard houses have a line of halls and courtyards that connect the street to the water's edge and floating markets would deliver directly to the houses. As China shifted from water to surface transportation, some of the canals were filled in but the water below ground is ever-present. In the second XJTLU Suzhou International Workshop (Feb. 2017) a group of participants walked around the northwest corner of the old city and counted fourteen water wells within a short distance, some inside the courtyard houses and some in the streets creating "water spots" or mini public spaces for outdoor cooking, mini gardens and public washing. Suzhou's water landscape of rivers, canals, water streets and lakes enters the famous walled gardens which are mostly formed around a central body of water.



Figure 3: Map from 1920 of the Yangtze River Delta with Suzhou to the east of Lake Tai. Virtual Shanghai image collection ID 233.



Figure 4: *View of Suzhou's Sheng Jia Dai 盛家埭, through the old town and towards the New District, photograph by Glen Wash.*

The gardens recreate natural Chinese landscapes in miniature, mountains and water 山水 [shān shuǐ], the general term for landscape. Diverting the waters and stacking stones were techniques that became essential to the construction of the Suzhou garden. Describing the Lingering Garden 留园 [Liú Yuán] (1593), Ron Henderson defines the lake as the heart of the garden fed by small waterfalls flowing out of the rockeries (Henderson 2013). The Humble Administrator's Garden 拙政园 [Zhuōzhèng Yuán] (1513-1529) is a strolling garden gathered around a body of water with

paths and bridges circumventing the water, the still lake reflecting the buildings, rockeries and plants. The water flows from the Humble Administrator's Garden under a wall to form a central water court of the neighbouring Suzhou Museum by I.M. Pei (2006), where it reflects the modern geometric forms of Pei's architecture. In "The Tangible and Intangible Value of the Suzhou Classical Gardens," Yi Xueling, Director of Suzhou Gardens and Landscaping Administration Bureau, explains the meaning of paradise:

天人合一 (Tiān rén hé yī) [...] the nature and the human are in harmony. If we understand the nature as ideal as Tian (heaven), and understand the urban life as Ren (human), then the ideal environment including natural tangibles in the city is the Paradise. (Yi 2008)

Suzhou's waterfront development continues on a large scale – the Jinji Lake waterfront development in the new Suzhou Industrial Park is a modern-day city equivalent of the ancient city moat and marks China's changing attitude to public space. The large open spaces designed to encourage gatherings and celebrations create a contrast to the city's walled gardens and narrow waterways. Suzhou's new water spaces play a key role in transforming the city into a 21st-century city, but are they also reinforcing the ancient idea of paradise in the water city?

2 Reflecting on the Seams

Voice 02, speaking from Suzhou, UTC +8

Emphasizing that China is undertaking the largest and fastest urbanization process in history has become a statement that does not necessarily explain unforeseen issues which are unique and complex to elucidate. We might be witnessing a moment of post-urbanization in which, while the “before” and “after” are more or less defined, the in-between appears to be veiled or ignored. We can all witness the magnitude of the transformation, yet the gaps generated by such a jump are more difficult to define. For instance, the separation between urban and rural is often cited. Yet, in China, the boundary between urban and rural has become diffused when trying to define this contrast through a duality that disintegrates and does not hold much meaning anymore (Bolchover and Lin 2013).

The same can be said about concepts like “tradition” and “modernity.” They are often used for categorizing and unifying extremely vast and complex periods. Everything that happened before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China seems to be labelled “traditional.” We could argue that modernity is not a way of looking but a way of being, i.e., it is not found in appearances. China can look incredibly modern, yet how would one define Chinese modernity?

Suzhou can exemplify this absence of an in-between. We focus on the uniqueness and tradition of the old town (even though just a few canal streets remain) or new developments like Suzhou Industrial Park or Suzhou New District, which are far larger (and perhaps more visited) than the old town. The half-demolished in-between is ignored; an anomaly that becomes unavoidable when we go through it, yet we forget once we reach the idealized tradition or the promising modernity. These are not spaces of transition; they are not the passage between two different urban conditions. What we have then is a new urban phenomenon: the fringe is no longer at the outskirts of the city. The fringe is now shattered and dispersed within the city. Vestiges that have no place, yet they are there. Vast fragments inviting to be assimilated and integrated are instead entirely absorbed and replaced.

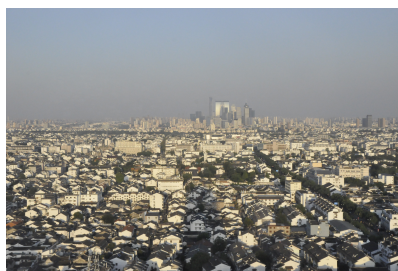


Figure 5: *Multiple versions of modernities exemplified by Suzhou’s Old Town and the city’s new districts*, photograph by Jiawen Han.

The question that appears then is: can a city change so fast and so much that it does not remain itself? What are the characteristics which define the idea of a city? Evidently, cities do grow and transform, expanding and evolving. This process is imprinted in its streets, buildings and citizens. When there are elements of urban consistency, this process is legible, evidencing a continuity that, no matter how dim, retains the city. If this continuity is completely ignored, can the city itself disappear? While an old citizen may not be able to recognize the city anymore, a young citizen is discovering it. Memory is both flexible and categorical because it is individual, not universal. The same applies to the idea of a city. The elements and events that enact it can be universal, but the idea of it is individual.

The invitation then is to look at the seams between Suzhou's urban parts and recognize them as possible retainers of continuity. These seams are not edges; they are not what defines nor divides the urban space. Instead, they become remnants, leftovers of the collisions between parts, and it is in these collisions that memory remains. These urban seams are the ones holding the different parts together while quietly defining them. They are the last refuges for the idea of a city. They cannot go away because we all know that without seams, there is no outfit.

3 Urbanisation, Planning and Spontaneity

Voice 03, speaking from Suzhou, UTC +8

Opening the long handscroll *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* 清明上河图 [Qīngmíng shànghé tú] by Qiu Ying 仇英, it is fascinating to compare the urban space and its associated scenarios in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) with those of current Suzhou, as one can find similarities and differences across history. In ancient Chinese tradition, the city wall normally indicates the boundary of the city, dividing the inside and outside of the city both physically and symbolically. The painting clearly depicts a considerable market space outside the city wall as lively as that on the inside. However, it should be noted that these spaces are generated under different mechanisms. The painting portrays clear contrasts between the places inside and outside the city: the market space outside the city wall contains denser crowds and is formed and defined by various activities in relation to transportation, commerce, and entertainment, which shows more spontaneity compared to the space inside the city wall. Inside the city, the architecture and streets are more regular, planned, and designed with purpose.

If we continue to make comparisons across history, Suzhou's Industrial Park, which is a new district located outside the old city wall, could be regarded as a modern equivalent of the urban space inside the city wall during the Ming dynasty

in terms of the relationship between people's activities and space, although the Industrial Park exhibits much greater regularity than its historic counterpart. The Old Town of Suzhou, which has largely inherited its morphology from history, accommodates more spontaneous activities today. Temporary events occupy spaces flexibly and naturally in the current Old Town, which corresponds to the use of the main bridge and riverbank outside of the city wall in the painting. The spontaneous track of urbanization outside the city played an important role in linking urban and rural areas during the Ming dynasty in Suzhou, and such areas have played an important role in linking urban and new districts as well as rural areas in many other contemporary cities across China. However, there was no spontaneous urbanism outside the city wall after the 1990s in Suzhou. The new development zones, including Suzhou Industrial Park and Suzhou New District, were purposefully established next to the Old Town as two wings, with the aim of preventing squatter settlements, illegal markets, and informal work. Today we generally see tradition and modernity as exemplified by Suzhou's Old Town and the city's new districts, respectively. Therefore, I am compelled to ask: does the dislocation of spontaneous and regulated spaces indicate the dislocation of the modern and the traditional inside and outside the boundary of the city from the past to the present?

The intuition to reflect the dislocation of the modern and the traditional by identifying different spatial characteristics indicates a common lens: research studies have always analysed Suzhou in a framework of old versus new, tradition versus modernity, which also becomes the foundation for understanding and analysing Suzhou. However, there is no consensus regarding modernity and its meaning in Suzhou's modern history, nor any conceptual coherence of tradition in the radical societal transformation of Suzhou, which results in little attention paid to the relationship between tradition and modernity. Consequently, very few observers have questioned when Suzhou began to strive toward the modern. Looking back in time to the painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, which depicts Suzhou's prosperity through lively scenes during Ming dynasty, we see numerous houses, shops, drama platforms, parade grounds, boats and merchant barges; the city seems never to rest. Economic growth stimulated the growth of Suzhou as



Figure 6: *Suzhou, courtyard of the Shadow Garden*, photograph by Claudia Westermann.

a city, in which peddlers, women, and the literati all sought and attempted to adopt new modes of conduct to make their way in the new world. Scheid (2017, p. 33) notes that Ye Tianshi's 叶天士 (1667–1747) oeuvre of medical innovation in the Yangtze Delta, with Suzhou a particularly important centre during the seventeenth century, can deepen our understanding of early modernity in China in relation to a more global early modernity. "The reopening of the Grand Canal effectively shunted Nanjing to secondary status and ensured that the Suzhou region would prosper as a nexus of interregional integration" (Brook 1998, p. 75). Examining Suzhou in Ming/Qing transition, Marmé (2007) confirmed that Suzhou was a major centre for the construction and repair of ocean-going ships in the early Qing period (1644–1911) embedded in an emerging East Asian, indeed global, system. In terms of space, Suzhou as an interregional and even global trading hub in the Ming and Qing dynasties significantly transformed its space to be kind of modern space: the Grand Canal flows through the western part of Suzhou city with a background of increased consumption, production, and specialisation in manufacturing. The production of the inner port terminal areas for cargo loading and unloading, trade transactions, feeding and supplementing etc. more closely resembles the operation of modern, efficient terminals. Therefore, if the reordering of Suzhou's space shown in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* represents part of the early search for the modern from the perspective of global history, the Old Town of present-day Suzhou should not be seen only as traditional. It can be seen as the continued effort or alternative version of the pursuit of modernity in the contemporary context.

4 Balancing Between "Within" and "Without"

Voice 04, speaking from Copenhagen, UTC +2

The world opens up in unexpected ways from inside a Chinese courtyard space. Located between the halls of a domestic house, it not only opens to the sky above – with the possibility for vertical alignment this invites – but also to an axial progression forward or backward, and thereby either deeper into the house or out of it. Horizontally, along this line, one moves through alternating spaces of darkness and light, openness and closure, passage and diversion, things to do or not. One traverses the stages of entry to the private domain, or one diverts, steps aside, lingers, turns around and walks back and out again. It depends on who you are and what relation to the household you have. Inside a courtyard, distinctions blur, multiple situations emerge, parallel worlds coexist. A Chinese courtyard is far from a simple square space between four walls but manifests qualities that complement

its surroundings. The architect and scholar Li, Xiaodong (2002, p. 99) writes:

One of the most important characters of Chinese architecture is the dualism of *void and solid* in the planning of space. Almost exclusively, every individual building unit, from smallest room to city, is planned to be adjacent to an equally sized open space. This is to achieve the maximum balance between what is 'within' and what is 'without.' This concept of duality is one of Lao Zi's important tenets. He believed that any notion contained within itself its opposite. As a result, the dispersed complex rather than the dense form distinguishes Chinese architectural space.

As the foundation of Daoism, Laozi's 6th century BCE text 道德经 [Dàodé Jīng] is central to Chinese thinking and practice alongside the traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism. It is especially important for the conception of gardens as part of the historical domestic compound, and if courtyards and small garden-like spaces organise everyday life in harmonious coexistence, then a sizeable complementary garden turns the place into a classical Chinese literati residence. Such a garden, occupying nearly half the site and cultivated with exquisite refinement, subsumes the house and gives a place its name. Suzhou is renowned for these historical sites now open to visitors for an experience of the artistic skill and taste of the literati class.

网师园 [Wǎngshī Yuán], or Master of the Nets Garden, is located in the southern part of Suzhou's Old Town within the encircling square moat 外城河 [Wàichéng Hé]. It is a significant Song Dynasty (960–1279) example of the garden/house dynamic with several courtyards mediating between the complementary forces of residence and ritual. The house – with its largely Confucian orientation – is axial, hierarchical and somewhat symmetrical, while the garden is a Daoist space for free and easy wandering. House and garden are like two sides of the same coin – different but connected, complementary yet set apart, never fully revealed to each other. The American author Ursula K. Le Guin renders section 11 of Laozi's text in the following way:



Figure 7: Suzhou, Shadow Garden with the Twin Pagodas in the background, photograph by Claudia Westermann.

THE USES OF NOT

spokes | meet in the hub. | Where the wheel isn't | is where it's useful.
Hollowed out, | clay makes a pot. | Where the pot's not | is where it's useful.

Cut doors and windows | to make a room. | Where the room isn't, | there's room for you.

So the profit in what is | is in the use of what isn't. (Le Guin 1997, p. 14)



Figure 8: *Song of One Year*, calligraphy on folding fan dated 1522, by Tang Yin 唐寅. The Met, Edward Elliott Family Collection, Douglas Dillon Gift, 1988.

part of the character for “courtyard,” while the pronunciations, added in pinyin, coincide despite having different intonations. Both terms build on the character 完 [wán], which translates into “whole” or “complete,” while the square that frames the character for “garden” is the radical 囗 [wéi or guó] referring to a “(circular) enclosure” (SmartHanzi 2009–2021).

And so it goes. The miniature cosmos of the Chinese courtyard house, with or without a garden, remains a spatial manifestation of a way of living. Here is paradise on earth – quite literally, heaven on earth pulsating from the centre of the garden-courtyard-house. The etymologies of several languages support the claim when the residence enclosed by a perimeter wall aligns with the etymological basis for the old Persian word *pairidaēza* – a compound of *pairi* – meaning “around” and *daeza* meaning “to form out of clay.” This term becomes the Greek *paradeisos*, meaning “royal (enclosed) park,” and later the English *paradise* (Oxford Dictionary of English 2005–2019).

The Chinese courtyard – 院 [yuàn] – and by extension garden – 园 [yuán] – are enclosed, walled, yet boundless spaces. From the smallest lightwell to the almost-garden, the courtyards hold the house, if not the whole city, together. They do so through the manifestation of empty spaces pacing life to the rhythm of seasons while mediating the opposing forces of ceremony and the everyday... among myriad other things with names and without. One notices that the interior part of the character for “garden” is included in the lower right

5 Reflections of Landscape

Voice 05, speaking from Marseille, UTC +2

"A quarter of an hour of a spring evening is worth a thousand strings of cash."

I say "Even with a thousand, you can't buy it back."

Excerpt, Song of One Year, Tang Yin 唐寅, 1522, transl. by Alfreda Murck (Barnhart 1983, p. 68).

The poet, calligrapher and painter Tang Yin 唐寅 is generally considered one of the *Four Masters* of the Ming Dynasty. He lived in Suzhou for most of his life. His poem *Song of One Year*, of which an excerpt is cited above, is written in delicate calligraphy on a folding fan. The poem describes the longing for detachment from busy life. It was written when most of the gardens that still exist in Suzhou today were created – in Ming Dynasty. At the time, busy administrators lived the life of dutiful Confucians dedicated to government during the day. Their evenings, however, were dedicated to the reverence for life in nature. The garden was their evening refuge, a "diminutive world" (Hall and Ames 1998, p. 181) which explicated the processes of life.

Gestured language, the basis of both calligraphy and painting, also engendered the garden with its connected courtyards. In fact, one could say that garden design in China began with gestured or embodied poetry. Images or scenes, first created in poetry but experienced through calligraphy, were transferred into painting and subsequently into three-dimensional images of living matter. A particular form of ancestor worship, the garden designers of the Ming Dynasty often relied on famous poems of the past. The images of the poem *Peach Blossom Spring*, written in 421 CE by Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 also known as Tao Qian 陶潛, could be considered the beginning of a garden design language (Barnhart 1983, p. 13). The writing of poems and the painting of landscapes were part of the garden design process, drafting the garden's composition of scenes. Thus, through a process of transformation from one poetic medium into another, the garden comes into being. It touches all senses. From inside the pavilion on the hill, the afternoon rain sounds like a lullaby. It is the result of sophisticated sound design that considers plants as acoustic surfaces. A drop of water sounds different on small and large leaves, flat and curled leaves – and so does the wind. Leaves are instruments. The weather plays on the leaves a natural symphony.

It is impossible to re-experience Suzhou's gardens as they were enjoyed in the past. Not only have they been altered many times, but they are also not private anymore. As Suzhou's most important tourist attraction, they are typically quite

crowded. And yet, Suzhou's gardens still make for small poetic worlds that one can escape into from the busy life on the street. The gestured language that created the gardens is a language of interaction and participation. It is still active today.

It should be noted that western linear perspective entered China only in the 18th century, thus hundreds of years after the Ming Dynasty, during which most of Suzhou's gardens were created. Traditional landscape painting until then did not use the Western so-called *through view* perspective 透视 [tòu shì]. The language of interaction that is active in traditional Chinese painting uses a different technique of depicting three-dimensional objects in a plane. It uses oblique projection with shifting viewpoints, referred to as *near-far* perspective 远近 [yuǎn jìn]. With its view lines pointing outwards and its viewpoints shifting at short intervals, near-far perspective draws the viewers in, from one into the next scene, as they move along the scroll (Westermann 2019).

In 1080 CE, in a famous treatise on painting, entitled *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* Guo Xi 郭熙 wrote (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 153):

You see a white path disappearing into the blue and think of traveling on it. You see the glow of setting sun over level waters and dream of gazing on it. You see hermits and mountain dwellers and think of lodging with them. You see cliffs by lucid water or streams over rocks, and long to wander there.

It makes sense that landscape painting is referred to always with a pair of characters, leaving an in-between that indicates space for agency. Mountain(s) water(s) 山水 [shān shuǐ] and mountain(s) river(s) 山川 [shān chuān] are some of the terms used. Wandering through the garden, views open up and close down. The landscape that speaks the voice of a very particular interactive art of poetry and painting turns visitors into participants of the world.

6 The Garden as a Portable World

Voice 06, speaking from Kuala Lumpur, UTC +8

The reach of a person can go beyond an individual's imagination; that imagination permeates into reality; that reality is experienced and shared with others knowingly and unknowingly. The reach of a small group of people with defined and intricate forms of cultural practices and applications, hailing from the coastal provinces around the Yangtze River Delta, have made their journey to a South-East Asian peninsular, Malaysia, creating a lasting impact. The term Sanjiang-ren was collectively used to describe these people of ancestry hailing from Shanghai,

- 1 Front Door [大门 Dà mén]
- 2 Sedan-chair Hall [轿厅 Jiào tīng]
- 3 Reception Hall [大厅 Dà tīng]
- 4 Beauty-within-reach Tower [挑秀楼 (花厅) Xié xiù lóu (huātīng)]
- 5 Downstairs Five Peaks' Library [楼下五峰书屋 Lóu xià wǔfēng shūwū]
- 6 Cloud Stairway Pavilion [梯云室 Tī yún shì]
- 7 Study of the Ethereal [集虚斋 Jí xū zhāi]
- 8 Veranda of the Slanting Bamboo Twig [竹外一枝轩 Zhú wài yīzhī xuān]
- 9 Watching Pines & Appreciating Paintings Studio [看松读画轩 Kàn sōng dú huà xuān]
- 10 Late Spring Study [殷春移 Diān chūn yí]
- 11 Pavilion Welcoming the Advent of the Moon and Breezes [月到风来亭 Yuè dào fēng lái tíng]
- 12 Hall of the Sweet Osmanthus Hillock [灌缨水阁 Guàn yīng shuǐ gé]
- 13 Tassel-washing Waterside Pavilion [听山山楼 Tīng shān shān lóu]
- 14 Dahoe House [蹈和馆 Dǎo hé guǎn]
- 15 Music Room [琴室 Qín shì]
- 16 Kuo Jia Tou Lane [南家头巷 Kuò jiā tóu xiàng]
- 17 Hall of Peonia Suffruticosa [花房 Huā fáng]

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5 10 20 尺 chī

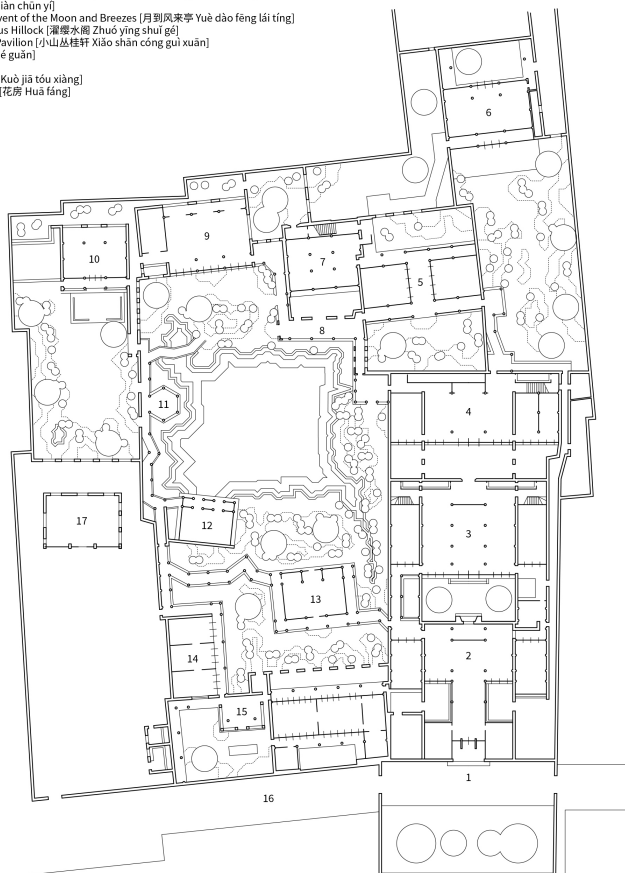


Figure 9: Suzhou, *Garden of the Master of the Nets*, redrawn by Amir Djalali, translated by Gao Huanyue, based on Liu Dunzhen's *Classical Gardens of Suzhou* (Liu 1978, p. 397).

Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hubei and Jiangsu which includes Suzhou (Penang San Kiang Association, 2020). Compared to other Malaysian Chinese subgroups, this is by far the smallest. Despite the number of this community, the first association was formed in Penang in 1897 and named San Jiang Clansmen Association to preserve their heritage and identity in what was then a new environment.



Figure 10: Suzhou, Twin Pagodas, photograph by Claudia Westermann.

unique styles are broken down into six: Penang Style, Southern Chinese Eclectic Style, Early Straits Eclectic Style, Late Straits Eclectic Style, Art Deco and Early Modern (Zwain and Bahauddin 2019).



Figure 11: *Tiger Hill*, as seen on *The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour*, by Jiao Bingzhen 焦秉贞, ca. 1707. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 50.5 x 813 cm (*Catalogue of Chinese Famous Painting in Japan* 1938, p. 294).

Slowly over the years, the influence of the Sanjiang-ren transcended and amalgamated into a mixture of Malaysian Culture. Its architecture experiencing perilous journeys has intercepted into many forms of the collective Malaysian architecture, settling into the tropical region surprisingly well. The vernacular shophouses, with the courtyard ever-present within the planning of the building, represent place and cultural identity with over 7000 units built between the 1790s and the 1970s. Its

The courtyard itself has integrated seamlessly and adapted into the Straits Eclectic style during the prosperous era of Georgetown, Penang, between the 1890s and 1940s. Escaping the sweltering tropical heat, one enters a quiet space that adeptly and gently opens to a courtyard embodying multiple functionalities. The ecological component of skylight and ventilation extends further in the forms of gardens and water features, thereby allowing the courtyard to serve as a communal, meditative and religious space embraced by the local culture and society (Abass, Ismail, and Solla 2016).

Beyond these practical functions, it almost acts as a conduit to an unknown, unnamed, unseen paradise. The courtyard

tucked away in the unique shophouses, creates an ethereal boundary between the inside and outside, taking the form of miniature imitations of the natural world, connecting and celebrating the ephemeral. The space surrounded by a bouquet of tropical plants and a modest body of water creates a fissure in space to another unattainable dimension, yet it is intangibly experienced. The human experience instantly reverses itself to an emblem of cool and calm with the pocketed micro-climate and humid taste of the air, born of a simple architectural feature that is the courtyard. A remnant of Suzhou's architectural past given new meaning and life in a new context in the Peninsular of Malaysia.

7 Heaven on the Ground, as the Heaven in the Sutras

Voice 07, speaking from Shanghai, UTC +8

Tiger Hill Pagoda 云岩寺塔 [Yún yán sì tǎ], Ruiguang Pagoda 瑞光塔 [Ruì guāng tǎ], Twin Pagodas 双塔 [Shuāng tǎ], Beisi Pagodas 北寺塔 [běi sì tǎ], and other ancient landmarks continue to stand out and act like needles interweaving the fabric of the canals, streets, and courtyard houses of the ancient city. The pagodas of Suzhou have dominated the skyline of the central city until the 1980s. As multi-story buildings dedicated to Buddhism, they were the skyscrapers of the 10th-12th centuries while the monasteries represented Heaven in the Buddhist Sutra.

The garden with its artificial mountains, rock steps, flower windows, lotus ponds, layered corridors acted as reminders, metaphors, connections for the ancient scholars to bridge life in the courtyard to the remote landscape, mentally and physically.

The spiritual connection to the gardens goes back a long time. The Chinese name for traditional garden, 园林 [yuánlín], originates from a legendary story from the Buddhist Sutras, could be simply as a piece of a paved *courtyard* 园 [yuán] with a *forest* 林 [lín] behind it, in this Jetavana Vihara 祇树给孤独园 monastery where Buddha discusses the Dharmas, the philosophy in Buddhism. Famous monasteries always have their gardens. Buddhism not only philosophically influenced the local garden construction, but also the programme. Spaces were designed for intellectuals to debate, meditate, and reflect from within the *forest and courtyard*.

During the festivals, the ancient temples became public spaces for everyone, while gardens in the backyards of monasteries were the most visited landscape sites. The surrounding areas turned into a prosperous community of markets and residences, and the city's wealth is depicted in these places' elegant architectural design and craftsmanship.

The private gardens in Suzhou started in the 4th to 5th Century when schol-

ars began to develop Buddhist philosophies during the Disunity period. Hermits and travelers depicted the natural landscape in poetry and painting, while private gardens were constructed for them to experience artistic features in three-dimensional space.



Figure 12: *Bamboo, Rock, and Tall Tree* 筠石乔柯, c. 1300s, by Ni Zan 倪瓒 (1301–1374), Yuan Dynasty. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; 67.3 x 36.8 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund 1978.65.

The height of the private Suzhou gardens' popularity came in the late 16th and early 17th Centuries due to growing economic prosperity in the Jiangnan region (Yangtze Delta area in South China). Word of Suzhou's exquisite gardens spread throughout China, and Emperors from Beijing often visited Jiangnan, particularly Suzhou, for inspiration for their own gardens. The design of Imperial gardens in Beijing, for example, was influenced by the private gardens in Suzhou, particularly with the interest of the Emperors of Kangxi and Qianlong during their southern inspections in Suzhou.

According to literature and gazettes, at one point, more than 250 private gardens were recorded in the late 18th Century.

However, as a result of the wars since the 1860s, most of them have deteriorated. Around the 1950s, the majority of the remaining private gardens of Suzhou were turned into public assets. Currently, there are only 108 listed gardens in Suzhou, with more than 80 under public or semi-public usage.

The four most well-known gardens – Humble Administrator's Garden 拙政园 [Zhuōzhèng yuán], Lingering Garden 留园 [Liúyuán], Garden of Master of Nets 网师园 [Wǎngshī yuán], and Huanxiu Villa 环秀山庄 [Huánxiù Shānzhūāng] (Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty) – were recognised as World Heritage Sites in 1997. An additional five, which demonstrate a broader spectrum of the Gardens from the 12th to 19th Century (Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing Dynasties) in the different historical

periods in Suzhou were added in 2000. More private gardens have been restored recently and opened for the public, allowing Suzhou to be rebranded as the City of Gardens.

8 Painting as a Portable Garden

Voice 08, speaking from Bologna, UTC +2

At a conference held at the University of Beijing in 1993, philosopher and linguist Umberto Eco described two ways in which the encounter between distant cultures might occur. On the one hand, our incapacity to explain the Other could lead to a “hermetic glorification,” attributing to its culture an occult significance when seeing it as the depository of a mysterious and higher wisdom, which is no longer accessible to us. Instead, when Marco Polo saw a rhinoceros in Java, he identified it with a unicorn – but he was disappointed to see that actual unicorns were not as graceful as those described in fantastic chronicles and medieval bestiaries. Marco Polo compared what he saw to a framework of reference which was already known to him, leading to what Eco called “false identification” (Eco 1995).

When approaching Chinese aesthetics and architecture, a person trained in Western art history would be tempted to read it through the lens of the 20th century artistic avantgardes. Chinese aesthetics seem to share many of the procedures which were introduced by Dada and Surrealism. Techniques such as ready-made, collage, fake copies, *cadavrexquis*, analogy and *détournement* seem to describe well the way in which Chinese gardens and landscape paintings were realised.

Chinese paintings often employed the technique of the exquisite corpse. They were enriched over time by poems, notes, comments, seals and stamps from connoisseurs, literati, poets and critics. Painters left white space on their scenes to allow for these additions over time. As Han (2017) points out, a signature on a painting is not an authorial act that seals off the artwork by declaring it finished but something that opens the work for further development as a form of dialogue. Paintings were copied several times, even adapting them over time to different styles and tastes. However, copies were not considered fake but were actually seen as “originals.” Even if they were not made by the hands of the master, they would be seen as this person’s genuine work. Chinese paintings were often collective, participatory works. They were not meant to be sealed off in a museum or private collection but meant to be exchanged and reproduced to reach a wider audience across space and time.

A painting is a portable garden. (They are literally portable since they are

made on silk scrolls, never meant to be framed or hung). There is no difference between a painting and the landscape that it is meant to represent. Like a painting, a garden is also a palimpsest, a collective work of art that changes and is enriched over time. A garden is also a copy: Suzhou private gardens are small copies of the large emperor's hunting estates. Gardens reproduce in small-scale mountains and rivers. Their pavilions reproduce ancient architecture and buildings from faraway lands. So, if a painting is a portable garden, a garden is a domestic version of the world (Bosker 2013). It is a mnemotechnic device, a theatre of the world, a time-travelling machine, a paranoid-critical device to ward off the anxiety of living. A garden is a scientific tool for self-secluded knowledge workers, for the study and the observation of the world in a controlled environment.



Figure 13: *The Humble Administrator's Garden*, photograph by Yiping Dong.

Establishing an anachronistic parallel between Chinese aesthetics with avantgarde practices might seem to be an example of false identification. However, these resemblances might testify to a more or less explicit network of exchanges and influences between the East and the West. After all, early twentieth-century European artistic culture was heavily influenced by Eastern art and philosophy. The artist Tristan Tzara did not hide his interest in the irreverent philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*, one of the foundational texts of Daoism (Wo 1977). Since the 19th century, artistic

avantgardes were directly influenced by Chinese painting, contributing to shifting Western perceptive habits—first and foremost, by getting rid of linear perspective (Scolari 2015).

Moreover, when looking at a foreign city and its images, one could hardly escape from attaching personal and collective memories and knowledges to its spaces by establishing hidden correspondences and analogies between artifacts and ideas, spaces and memories often distant in time and space. This, however, not only relates to the way in which the city is perceived, but also to the way in which it is built, as a juxtaposition of fragments linked to distant places, ideas, images and meanings.

9 Epilogue

The dialogue on the city of Suzhou from eight different positions and framed points of view becomes an imagined, remembered and experienced collective construction. The city emerges as a complex patchwork of entangled insights and ideas exploring the notion of paradise.

Paradise on earth, as in the historical Chinese city, is a space collectively re-created in shifting media and translated over time to eventually become inhabitable. Its countless projections inspire new ways of designing the city and, today, conceptions of paradise can be instrumental in this process. If in the city of Suzhou, tradition has been linked to the pursuit of modernity, then the making of paradise as part of this process expresses a vision of the future.

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