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Introduction

As the eye wanders through Yuan Jiang's *View of the Mountain Villa* (Fig.1), one is struck by the interchangeability in representation between the rockeries in the garden and the mountain landscape beyond, such that there is no firm boundary between the illusory and the real. This is a view of the now-lost *Gazing Garden* in Nanjing, the private estate of a scholar-official during the height of Qing China, within the Jiangnan region of the south that has produced the archetypal 'Chinese garden'. The axially orientated architecture of the residential compound is dissolved into a landscape of tall mountains and winding paths, which take on fantastical proportions despite being contained within the garden wall. The extensive prominence of stones, and architectural settings amongst them, is probably the most striking feature of the archetypal Chinese garden and scholar's studio, the culmination of a long religious, literary and artistic admiration of rocks and the mountains they recall.

To the gentleman-scholar, a rich visual dictionary of geological phenomena was available in the traditions and conventions of ink-brush painting, representing tors, dipped strata, karst pinnacles and hogback anticlines in their descriptive portrayals of mountain scenery. Painting handbooks went further, with the early Qing *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* naming over 20 variations of the *cun*, or stippling technique, corresponding, intentionally or not, to real phenomena such as glacial valleys, igneous peaks, and eroded schists. Despite such levels of systematisation in painting, and a long history of cataloguing stones and minerals, no systematic geological study developed in China until the 19th century, despite even a wealth of knowledge contained most notably in the pharmacopoeias of *bencao* literature and in Daoist texts – with some descriptions of a theory of sedimentation and geological time dating to as early as the eighth century.¹ The 12th-century polymath Shen Kuo

famously described what will be known as processes of erosion of uplifted strata and sedimentary deposition in his *Dream Pool Essays*, whilst the introduction to the chapter on stones in the 16th-century *Bencao Gangmu* underscores an understanding of metamorphosis and sedimentation when it states that:

Stones/minerals are *qi* turned to kernels; they are soil turned to bones. Large ones form cliffs and rocks; fine ones form sand and dust.... When what once has flown and what once has run with a numinous nature turns into stones/minerals, this is a change from what has feelings to something that has no feelings.²

However, rather than a systematic search for an exact geological origin in time – the impetus behind a biblically inspired flood geology – the Chinese literati élite, in keeping with the prerogatives of the imperial examination system, were typically unconcerned with geological investigation, leaving such matters the preserve of countless anonymous craftsmen and alchemists. Buddhist and Daoist ideas of cyclical time and impermanence intertwined with empirical observation, explicated in tales of mountains and valleys that exchanged positions over time, or in the literary idiom of *sangtian*, ‘mulberry fields’, which were once under water, or would be in the future,³ an expression of the impermanence of things. It is telling that the first text dedicated entirely to stones, the 12th-century *Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest*, deals primarily with aesthetic and utilitarian uses of stones, with only passing remarks on a theory of fossils and the processes of erosion.

In this context, it was the aesthetic or philosophical values the literati saw in stones that appealed to them, a specific geological imagination in which ‘earth’ was elementally situated in a cosmic system. In their evocation of heavenly mountains, otherworldly paradises, dream journeys and, paradoxically, qualities of animism, movement and change, the fascination with geological and mineral objects reveals analogous processes in painting and garden-making in a literati setting that valued the cultural imaginary at least as much as material reality. Seeing the garden as the site of retirement, enjoyment, and refuge from the ‘dusty world’⁴ of officialdom or civilisation itself, it is no accident that mountains and caves, microcosms of the workings of Nature, and paradisaical sites in Daoist mythology of encounters with immortals and life-prolonging alchemical ingredients, should find themselves represented as *gongshi*, scholar’s rocks, in the garden, whether in the form of the singular *feng*, the ‘peak’, or the constructed composite *jiashan*, ‘mock mountains’, replete with grotto-like chambers. Its accompaniment is the painted landscape scroll, expressions of personal introspection and the vehicles for dream journeys. What follows is a discursive meander through the practices that have informed the ‘geo-religious phenomenon’⁵ of scholar’s rocks, and the cyclical and oscillating relationship of painting and poetry to broader interpretations of geology and the Chinese garden, a constant re-imagining through other cultural practices.



Heavenly Mountains

In common with traditional cultures that consider mountains sacred sites, classical Chinese texts and folk religions consider the Five Great Mountains (Tai, Heng 衡, Hua, Heng 恆, Song), located at the four cardinal directions and at the centre of ancient China, as the manifestations of gods, in this context ‘fixing’ in place the physical space of the world (see Fig.2). These gods presented themselves in heavenly, earthly, and chthonic forms; constellations, mountains and subterranean caves contained connotations of the divine. The latter two manifested



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the powers of fertility, movement and the supposedly timeless forces of life, being the sources of water, metals, minerals and jade, long associated with alchemy and thus immortality. The cave and the grotto, interior counterparts of the sacred mountain, were viewed in this tradition as a mirror of the heavens above, replete with separate suns and moons, and containing their own temporal logic. This is the world of the *dongtian*, or grotto-heaven, stories of which proliferated so that ‘in the course of time [...] the imagination began to visualize the earth as a porous, sponge-like structure’,⁶ driving the development of a literary geography from as early as the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), tracing the locations of precious ores and stones and those of lesser sacred mountains and caves.

Seen as the noblest articulation of the *Dao* and thus of the essence of ‘the myriad things’, mountains, caves and water have been of long-standing fascination for Chinese painters and poets. Indeed, the term ‘landscape’ or ‘landscape painting’ is known simply by its essential elements of *shanshui*, ‘mountain-water’. Such landscapes, real or ideal, closest to the natural and untouched by human intervention, have been frequently identified as sites of refuge from political turmoil and worldly civilisation. The escapist and utopian tradition is best encapsulated in Tao Yuanming’s (365–427) classic fable the *Peach Blossom Spring*, in which a fisherman, following the source of a river, reaches a grotto where he discovers an ethereal utopia inhabited by refugees of a past age, living in harmony with nature and unaware of the worldly strife without (see Fig.3). In more esoteric Daoist practices, the mountain and its caves are the site of otherworldly encounters with hermits and immortals, a place where adepts harvest medicinal plants, or the ‘life giving “milk” that was thought to drip from the stalactites in limestone caves’.⁷ Such powerful associations with the fantastical in the theological and literary tradition were not lost on garden designers, from the private gardens of the literati to the royal gardens of the late imperial era, with *Bieyoudongtian*, ‘another cave-heaven’, sited within the flat topography of the now destroyed Old Summer Palace in Beijing nonetheless bringing to mind the paradisaical possibilities of dwelling within the hallowed spaces of the mountains through its constructed rockeries.

Just as the cave was seen as sacred and containing a cosmological model, so was the Daoist altar, itself typically located within grottoes or mountains, formalised in the Tang dynasty liturgy. Whereas the altar was typically a square with prescribed dimensions on raised steps, echoing the mountain, Kristofer Schipper compares its architectural arrangement as akin to being *in* the mountain, echoing the term *daochang*, ‘place or enclosure of the *Dao*’. Within the temple, instead of the priests facing a single wall adorned with figures of deities, the decoration surrounds them on all sides, such that ‘this multi-level mountain – the altar – is located around the officiating priest rather than the priest being on the altar: he is in the mountain, the Space of the *Dao*’.⁸ Such a reading situates the altar as both inside and outside, where one is both within the mountain but also able to view its exterior,⁹ a key theme in the appreciation of scholar’s rocks, but also in the labyrinthine expressions of the Chinese garden.

Miniaturisation and Magic

The admiration of mountains and caves found their abstract expression in the countless ornamental rocks placed in palaces, gardens and on scholars’ desks; planted on the ground, placed on carved wooden stands, or framed on the wall, as with marble sheets selected for their veins reminiscent of mountain landscapes. Whether in the garden, or in the form of the smallest ink-brush stand and incense-burner, these are metaphorical readings of the rock as mountain, playing with the theme of miniaturisation as supreme artistry, an ‘aesthetic mediation that traverses the boundary of reality and illusion’.¹⁰ Hence the late Ming rockery designers Zhang Nanyuan and Zhang

Nanyang would treat their placement of rocks as the creation of illusions that situate the garden as but one part of a vast landscape beyond the walls, or else in the creation of ‘peaks’ that show no trace of human artifice, some of which were thought by the scholar-official Wang Shizhen to seem more real than actual mountains, which can themselves appear ‘illusory’.¹¹ Such a practice capitalises on the blurring of the real and the imagined, or rather, an expansion of the real through the imagination, not unlike Rolf Stein’s suggestion that the smallness of a rockery ‘raises it from the level of imitative reality and puts it in the domain of the only true reality – mythical space’.¹² Especially potent is when the depiction is at a scale accessible to handling, taking on the dimension of a *wan*, or toy, like the objects of creative play in a sandbox. Working with illusion and the imagination, miniatures and the creation of potted landscapes find clear parallels in the literati culture around garden-making. So the Tang poet Bo Juyi writes:

Wherever I stay, even if it is only for a day or two, I would often turn upside down a basketful of earth to make a terrace, gather a fistful of rocks to make a mountain, encircle a ladleful of water to make a pond – such is my obsessive love for landscape.¹³



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Stein’s exhaustive analysis of the miniature landscape compares it to its potential origins in folk religious practices of talismanic representation, both as depictions of spirits that confer power over the represented object, and as the legitimising recreation of the world within the royal domain, as in the earliest imperial parks. In this vein, depictions are not mere copies that recall things to mind, but in their making create a new, magical reality. This is best illustrated by the early ninth-century tale of the Daoist Yiqi Xuanjie who, retained at the imperial court against his wishes, creates a miniature landscape including a wooden sculpture of the Blessed Isles of Penglai. When the emperor expresses regret at being unable to visit this paradise, he jumps into the air and makes himself smaller and smaller until he disappears into his landscape.¹⁴ Many prized scholar’s rocks were those with three peaks, or else arranged on their stands in such a way that the bottom was remarkably thin, a reference to the supposed shape of Penglai. This play with scale, and the emphasis on the adept who is able to inhabit a separate, miniaturised space, is the theme of folk tales of the World Within the Gourd, a magical realm that may be carried on the end of a staff, or the Buddhist idea of the mustard seed that contains Mount Sumeru (see Fig.4). Indeed, ‘Heaven Inside a Gourd’, ‘Hiding in a Vase’, or ‘The Sea Within a Sleeve’ are common names for areas in a garden,¹⁵ sometimes referenced literally in the playful shapes of portals (known as *dongmen* or ‘cave-door’) and windows of gardens that still survive in Suzhou, as gourds, vases, or the cave-like ‘moon-door’ (Fig.5).

Stone Lore

Far removed from the setting of the formal garden or palace, stones were central to ancient folk practices and stories, what Jing Wang calls ‘stone lore’.¹⁶ In contrast to the contemporary semantic associations of ‘stone’ as dead matter, hard and unfeeling, a web of folk beliefs saw stone and the earth as capable of transformation and creation, the matter out of which life was born. From the creation myths of the mother goddess Nüwa repairing the heavens with stones of the five colours, to the use of stone at sacrificial altars of the fertility goddess Gao Mei, rock was associated with healing and procreation, in common with other ancient ritual practices, from the *omphalos*, the navel, at Delphi, to the Hindu Shiva linga. Though the literati scholars who built their gardens were largely Confucian, traces of the magical, animistic associations of stone survive, as in the well-known tale of the Song scholar Mi Fu bowing and addressing



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a rock as his 'Elder Brother Rock', whilst the Song Emperor Huizong undertook construction of an enormous rockery at his capital Bianliang as a generator of *gen*, one of the trigrams of the *Book of Changes*, to guarantee male heirs, bankrupting his dynasty in the process. It is not surprising, too, to see stones associated with the possibilities of religious illumination. Bodhidharma, legendary transmitter of Buddhism to China, was said to meditate for years facing a rock, whilst the *arhat* are conventionally depicted seated on rocky outcrops (Fig.6), the transformation of 'the imagery of stone from a source of reproductive energy into one of spiritual energy'.¹⁷ And so the late Ming scholar Qi Biao remarks of his garden rock:

All linger here in the gazebo, each moved to melancholy and regret at the passage of time. But here the Master of the Garden has no special friend with whom to sit opposite and converse, only my little friend Cold Cloud rock. He, at least, does not allow himself to become inflamed by the vicissitudes of human affairs and can be said to be my true winter friend.¹⁸

The qualities of certain rocks contained, too, the ideal qualities of the gentleman-scholar. So it is with jade, long used in ancient imperial rituals conferring the mandate of heaven. Its entry in the Han dynasty dictionary the *Shuowen Jiezi*, in contrast to the qualities admired in scholar's rocks, reads:

Jade, the quintessence of stone, has five virtues. Smooth and warm, it can be compared to *ren*, 'human-heartedness'; one can tell its inner texture and essence from the outside, it can thus be compared to *yi*, 'righteousness'; its sound is eloquent and far-reaching, it is thus regarded as a token of *zhi*, 'wisdom'; one cannot bend it without breaking it, thus it is compared to *yong*, 'bravery'; bright and clean, yet not covetous, it is an emblem of *jie*, 'purity'.¹⁹



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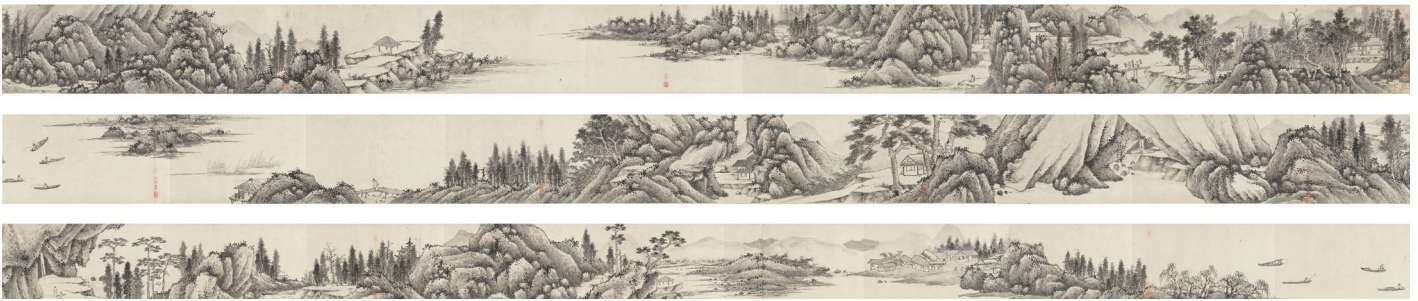
The well-known practice of 'borrowing views' in gardening is not simply the act of creating particular spatial arrangements allowing the scenery within the garden to be enhanced by landmarks beyond the walls, but one in which *jing* (scenery) and *qing* (sentiment) are intertwined in the sense of co-arising (*qing jing xiang sheng*) or fusion (*qing jing xiang rong*).²⁰ Just as Li Bai in his poem remarks: 'For looking at each other without getting tired, there is only Mount Jingting',²¹ here nature and man are given equal footing as the basis of companionship, and the gaze extends both ways. The Daoist traditions of holy men communing with animals and mountains reflect what Jane Bennett refers to as 'thing-power', a frame of mind that reveals the 'shimmering vitality of all matter',²² a reminder of the affective power that all matter possesses: from the scale of a mountain to microplastics, providing or restricting the conditions for further life. Within the Chinese garden, this can be brought into sharp focus with the particular practice of embedding of rocks within whitewashed walls, where moss will grow over the years, creating remarkably painterly compositions reminiscent of mountain landscapes (Fig.7). Contemplating rockeries, one is aware of a cyclical relationship between matter, life, and aesthetics.



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Inner and Outer

Considering the traditional aesthetic criteria for scholar's rocks of *shou* (thinness), *zhou* (surface folds) and *tou* (porosity), such works emphasise the ability explicitly to read the interior at the exterior (see Fig.8). It is similar to what John Hay describes as 'the perception of the earth by a geologist, trained to the degree that he cannot help but



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see the formations of its surface in the forms of erupting energy within the interior'.²³ Leanness and porosity reveal the nature of the interior, whilst texture acts as a microcosmic reflection of the material structure of the whole: analogous to the logic in Confucian ethics that sees the relationship of father to son as the model of that between the emperor and his subjects. The value of the interior exists as the privileged site of 'true essence', within an epistemological, religious and political worldview that emphasises the centre. Its importance on the literati imagination cannot be overstated: mountains and scholar's rocks form the foundation of various mind-landscapes or indeed dreamscapes, as the *topos* wherein the nature of the self is revealed (see Fig.9). So Su Shi, Song literatus and noted admirer of rocks, writes of a landscape painting by Song Di:

How expansive is your heart,
Hills and rivers coil themselves inside...
I know you have hidden thoughts,
I examine closely to find them.²⁴

Such thinking, and the near equivalence of the structure of landscape and the structure of the soul, is tied to the meandering nature of viewing landscape scrolls and walking the garden, explicated in the literary tradition. The enigmatic aesthetic criterion of *qiyun shengdong*, or 'spirit-resonance, life-motion',²⁵ developed as early as the Wei Jin period (220–420), refers to the task of the painter to 'transfer the human spirit' or emotion into the figurative subject they are depicting, whilst simultaneously having the subject possess a mystical (rather than literal or indeed perspectival) realism that captures its essence. This striving for a continuity between inner and outer essence is indebted to Daoist thought, as a mode of reading the 'essence' of things but also of the fusion of human emotions and qualities with non-human objects; an articulation of the interconnectedness of natural phenomena and of us to them.

The landscape and the nature that is admired is further seen as one in continual flux, expressed from the time of the classic divination text the *Book of Changes* from the Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE), with each element of the matrix influencing the other. The literati's fascination with these rocks could be said to be born out of their embodiment of supposedly cosmic processes: of the *yin* of water eroding the *yang* of rock, of constant transformation. Indeed, the associations of clouds and mists with mountains are not merely references to heavenly worlds, but the macrocosmic counterpart to the solidity of the mountain, seeping through and piercing its rocky surface. The traditional aesthetic criteria for rocks may be seen along a dynamic scale: thinness against fatness, roughness against smoothness, and porosity against solidity. They function as metaphors of the forms of becoming and dissolution, the same dynamism contained in the mountain-water landscape. Their very formation reads as a poetic metaphor: the much-admired limestone karst landscapes of southern China are the product of the slow accretion of marine skeletons



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– molluscs, bryozoa and corals – partially dissolving and re-solidifying into a calcareous mass. Brought to the surface over the course of geological time, they began their solution weathering from rainwater and river channels, forming the fantastical outcrops and complex cave systems seen today, the best-known of which are perhaps the stone forests of Guilin. At a smaller scale, the connoisseur's favoured rocks from Lake Tai, with their distinctive pits and perforations that embody these inward-outward dynamics, were similarly formed through gradual erosion in the acidic waters of the lake; certain forward-thinking craftsmen even had selected stones dropped into the waters, to be picked up by later generations. It is telling that the most admired specimens were sedimentary rocks, easily shaped by nature but also by the craftsman, who often attempted to enhance their appearance of 'naturalness'. Tougher, igneous material – basalt and granite – were used sparingly as artistic found objects. Scholar's rocks were admired not so much for their material concreteness, but their 'gaseous qualities and the different degrees of its spirituality'.²⁶

Worlds within the Garden

The earliest Chinese gardens are thought to have been simple found sites: a grove or lakeside plot with thatched huts and wattle fences. The formal garden began with the setting of royal parks, where the placement of rocks, compared to the literal raising of mountains, existed as part of 'zoological, botanical and geological gardens, which both figuratively and literally were understood to represent the entire terrestrial realm',²⁷ a way of legitimising royal rule even before the emergence of a unified imperial China in the third century BCE. With the consolidation of a central state and bureaucracy, it did not take long for elaborate private gardens to emerge, the most widely admired of which may be Wang Wei's Wang River Villa outside Xian, built around the 730s (Fig.10). Such gardens broadly employed a geomantic *fengshui* model of having mountains to the north, with water to the south, and an outward aspect into the landscape. This model inspired similar gardens in Japan and Korea, such as the still extant Shugaku-in imperial villa in Kyoto, which incorporates views of rice fields, and was used variously in private, palace and temple landscapes. Beginning in the 14th century in the southern Song, Chinese gardens increasingly moved away from the high Tang architectural convention of sparsely arrayed buildings set within large grounds. With the bringing of the mountain as mediated by the rockery into the space of the garden itself, the gaze turned inward, into the unfolding of space within. Coupled with the constraints of the small plots of land available in the bustling mercantile cities of the *Jiangnan* region, what we know of as the typical literati garden emerged: a compressed space offering a multitude of twists and turns and perspectival shifts.



The literati garden, as a site for private refinement and enjoyment, existed as separate from the ordered Confucian world of the residential complex with its structured courtyards. Within the literary record, some basic archetypes can be outlined as: a natural retreat and model for rustic simplicity; a fantastical paradise; and a horticultural garden

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for the appreciation of flowers. Certainly, most of the extant classical gardens contain a combination of these uses, but what we know today as the 'Chinese garden', concentrated in the cities of Suzhou, Yangzhou and Wuxi, most strongly exemplify the type of the fantastical other world, what has been described as 'worlds within worlds'.²⁸ Many such gardens have been the product of the late Ming revival in garden-making, whether as new constructions or restorations of older sites, coinciding with what Craig Clunas, in his exhaustive study of late imperial gardening,²⁹ has marked as a shift from productive sites where food and cash crops were cultivated to sites that were primarily understood in aesthetic terms, a process that became complete by the early 17th century. Indeed, Ji Cheng, author of the first full treatise on gardening, the *Yuan Ye*, completed around 1631, claimed that his intention was always to achieve 'the painterly mood'³⁰ in gardens, and to this end devotes a large section of the text to the instruction of raising mountains and selecting rocks.



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What criteria were applied in the philosophical appraisal of caves and rocks, the dynamics of inner and outer, may similarly be applied to the labyrinthine nature of the garden, as the space for illusion and pleasure but, paradoxically, through the same devices, religious clarity and self-cultivation. Kiyohiko Munataka has interpreted the sponge-like, leaky structures of grotto-heavens as the very conceptual model for the architectural structure of the garden, in their constant subdivision, complex visual layering and dynamic spatial juxtapositions.³¹ Just as a constructed rockery allows the visitor to wander in and out amongst its openings, perhaps chancing upon a grotto large enough to sit and dwell (Fig.11), architectural divisions in the form of walkways and densely spaced walls are made prominent, and emphasis is placed on the special transition between these boundaries through the use of *dongmen*, the aforementioned 'cave-door', or *louchuang*, the 'leak-windows' with elaborate perforations, which allow for layered views into spaces beyond (Fig.12). Su Shi, writing of a garden rock, describes remarkably rich spatial possibilities in layered mountains and windows that open into other realities:

...Mount Jiuhua is now retained in an immortal's jar.
When water from the Heavenly Pond falls over it,
Each layer of the mountain is clearly revealed.
The windows of jade-maidens are lighted;
They are connected to many places.³²

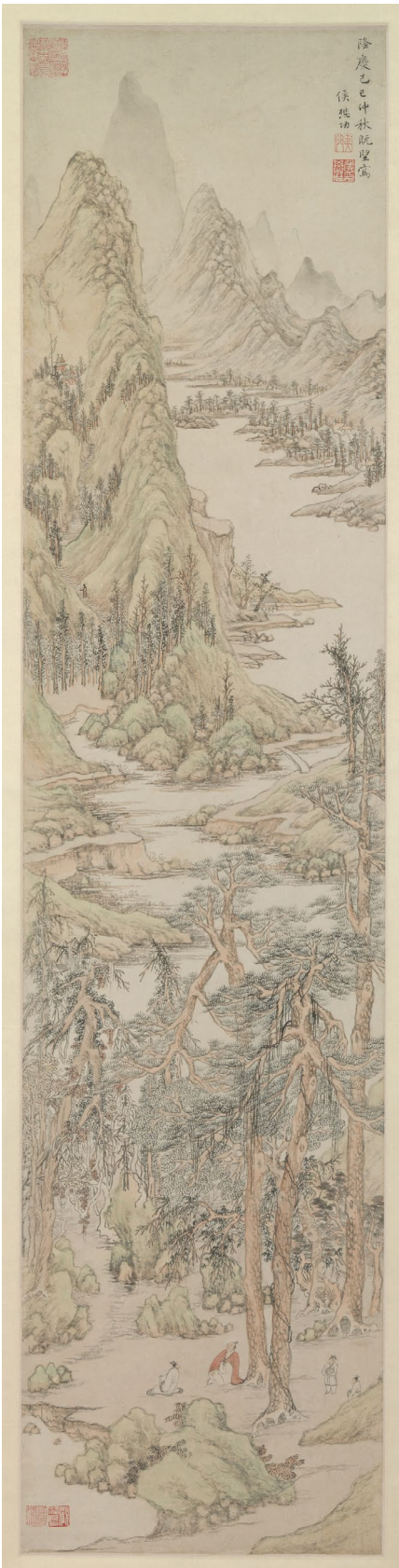


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The architecture of gardens works in tandem with rockeries to achieve what was admired in garden writings as a place to lose one's way, providing a constantly shifting experience, in scale, lighting, and direction, analogous to traversing a cave. Together with reflections in water and references to boats, the architecture made allusions to the unmoored 'freedom, spontaneity, and political disengagement'³³ that was sought by the scholar-official, a reclamation of the rustic landscape within an urban compound.

Rocks, Paintings, Dreams

Along the edges of ponds, walls and paths, rockeries distort the scale and specificity of such features in the garden, blurring the boundaries so that one might inhabit an illusion. This was not a mimetic vision of nature but a transformed one, an illusionistic expansion of space, and the bringing of fantastical worlds into the dwelling (see Fig.13). As seen in the theme of the religious *dongtian* and the *Peach Blossom Spring*, mountains and caves are in essence a liminal space between this world and a heavenly one, or else as sites of personal religious transformation. To the literati creators of gardens, dreams and illusions are not only an indulgence for the senses, but the form through which philosophical attitudes on the transitory



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nature of life may be declared and experienced. Drawing from Buddhist and Daoist ideals of transcendence, the illusory world is a reminder of the fleeting value of worldly achievement, tied to the constant transformation that takes place in ‘the myriad things’. So Qi Biaoja, closely mirroring the butterfly parable in the Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*, reflects on his dreams of his garden:

The allegory of my mountain is lodged in consciousness. It is lodged also in a dream, and if one can understand the allegory thus lodged in both dream and consciousness, how can one know that the dream is not itself conscious and consciousness not itself a dream?³⁴

The aesthetics of illusion further functioned as the stage for an alternate reality wherein political loyalism was possible, as a source for spiritual comfort for the literati in the wake of the violent dynastic transition from Ming to Qing and the establishment of a new political reality.

Geological imaginings of mountains and caves informed intertextual allusions in works of painting, literature and architecture. Thus, seekers of the fantastical did not need to travel to distant mountains themselves, but could have this experience reading texts and viewing paintings, as well as while touring their own garden. This is the practice of *woyou*, ‘touring whilst lying down’, variously translated as ‘armchair sojourn’ or ‘dream journeys’, which proliferated amongst the literati élite to the point that some late imperial scholars saw it as superior to actual sightseeing, allowing for culturally appropriate ways of looking and the correct mindset. The famed late Ming travelogue *Jinling Tuyong* claimed to be a substitute for real experiences of Nanjing, with later editions containing prints, collections of poetry and a historical atlas of the city, emphasising subjective vantage points from which to see.³⁵ Despite the emphasis in the traditional literature on a ‘correct’ way of seeing prescribed by élites, such a practice of private touring and keeping journals paves the way for a radically personal view of the material at hand. The creation of other worlds to inhabit arose simultaneously with trends in landscape painting, with the early painter Zong Bin (375–444) probably being the first to emulate the mystical experience of mountains in painting, seeing his works as substitutes that enabled the transformation of his mental state into that engendered by being in nature.³⁶ The idea of the journey is further reinforced by the much-analysed aspects of a-perspectivity and scale distortion between near and far in Chinese painting, which allow the eye to wander ‘spatially’ (see Fig.14). So widespread was this reading that Walter Benjamin, in his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, tells of a ‘story from China’ where:

An old painter [...] invited friends to see his newest picture. This [...] showed a park and a narrow footpath that ran along a stream and through a grove of trees, culminating at the door of a little cottage in the background. When the painter’s friends, however, looked around for the painter, they saw that he was gone – that he was in the picture.³⁷

The traditional mode of viewing a hanging scroll, slowly from bottom to top, emphasises the narrative journey, whilst the horizontal handscroll, in contrast to its display in contemporary museums, was to be appreciated in private gatherings, unrolled section by section to produce an intimately temporal experience.

Perhaps the most direct application of the liminal association of caves and garden rockeries, in contrast to the landscape scroll that is miniaturised space, is in the *trompe-l’oeil* painting *Qianlong Watching Peacocks in*

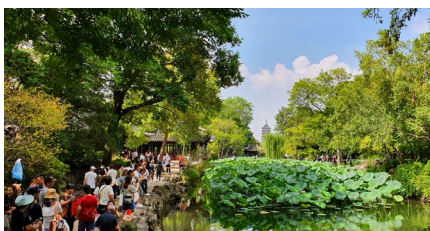
Their Pride, installed in a now-demolished interior for the eponymous Qing emperor, analysed in detail by Kristina Kleutghen.³⁸ Utilising perspectival techniques introduced by Jesuit courtiers, its 'space' is accessible only by passing through a 'cave' passage, conveniently painted surrounding a real door. This scenic illusion, as well as Qianlong's poetry for the *Forty Views of the Yuanmingyuan* referencing the 36 grotto-heavens of the Tang dynasty Daoist canon, reveals that esoteric knowledge of grotto-heavens and the 'possibility of using them to access otherworldly realms was entirely familiar during the high Qing'.³⁹

Found Art and the Imagination

As a type of 'found object', what separated the scholar's rock from the many others under the mud and made it an elevated object of contemplation was the intervention of culture: the prestige given to particular properties and specimens by the ideals of the literati. The process sometimes applied to entire mountains: Huangshan, one of the most visited in modern China, was a relatively recent entry to the pantheon of famous scenic sites, having been promoted in the late 16th century by the monk Pumen through the circulation of prints and audiences with élites and court eunuchs. In time poetry and literary societies formed around the mountain, giving rise to the Anhui school of painting and the further popularisation of the location.⁴⁰ The shifting terrain of culture underscores the importance of the mind in creating value, and has been compared to the Surrealist practice of using 'found objects', radically repurposed from the functional banality of the item at hand to evoke personal dreams and desires.⁴¹ This underscores a recurrent theme in the appreciation of landscapes and architecture in the Chinese tradition, that of the value of art and literature *about* a place overriding its material reality. In poems, paintings, and especially in the travelogues and gazetteers in the practice of *wayou*, one rarely sees accurate descriptions of material, size and shape; though official and technical accounts exist, the value of a place is in its poetic qualities and the depth of reference in the literary corpus, precisely its place in the cultural imagination (see Fig.15). It is in this sense that Thorsten Botz-Borstein refers to famous Chinese gardens and architecture as hyperreal 'monuments of the mind', constructions of culture more real than the real.⁴²



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There are no questions of authenticity regarding Suzhou's famed Beisi pagoda, a structure that has been constantly rebuilt since the third century, the most recent iteration of which is a 20th-century construction (Fig.16). Similarly, the question of the Ship of Theseus becomes irrelevant when applied to the Ise Shrine in Japan, which has its ancient reality reaffirmed through the authenticity of its ritual destruction and rebuilding every 20 years, a practice that has not allowed it to have UNESCO world heritage site listing under a materialist interpretation of history. The timber architecture of the literati gardens of Suzhou likewise undergoes continual replacement, repainting and retiling, so that when walking through its refurbished state one may fantasise being a Ming dynasty scholar, unironically aided by tourists in *hanfu* costume. This continual rebirth is not unlike Buddhist reincarnation, or the natural mimesis that occurs during biological cell replacement, the perfect bio-metaphor. Indeed, the poet and sinologist Victor Segalen (1878–1919), considering the relationship that cultures had towards creating timeless monuments, noted that the perishable materials from which Chinese architecture was built reflected an attitude that yielded to the inevitable loss of material objects to time. Eternity, instead of inhabiting the building, should inhabit the builder.⁴³ Hence the scholar-official Sun Xinzhai praised his *inability* to leave his descendants a real garden, only poems and a painting of his Garden of Longing, because it was precisely these 'words to receive' that allowed his son not to forget him, saving his family from decadence and

the inevitable decay of a physical garden.⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, treatises on scholar's rocks compiled by the literati made only cursory investigations into the geological origin or technical aspects of the stones. Rather, a particular geological imagination ascribed to 'dead' matter cultural values and significance that outstripped a static original.

Destruction and Deconstruction

The constant rebuilding and repair of Chinese gardens is not merely the result of cultural attitudes towards preservation, as Segalen has suggested, however. Despite the privileging of their literary doubles, in their long history as real, physical property, the gardens of the literati have undergone periods of destruction and renewal, which was the fate of many historically significant examples in the Ming-Qing transition and more dramatically as a result of the destruction wrought during the Taiping Rebellion of the mid-19th century. Beginning in 1851 in China's southwest, the Taiping, a millenarian, Christian-derived anti-Manchu movement, came to occupy the lower Yangtze delta, the primary commercial and cultural node of Qing China and the region most famed for its garden culture. The ensuing social and economic upheaval caused as they sought to materialise utopian social visions, and the use of flooding and fire as military strategies by opposing Qing forces, decimated the wealthy cities of Suzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou and Nanjing, the rebel capital, in a larger conflict which by 1864 claimed 20 or 30 million lives. A postwar Suzhou gazetteer estimated that fewer than one in ten residential gardens in the city survived, whereas the fate of the Accommodating Garden in Nanjing, erstwhile residence of the premier 18th-century poet Yuan Mei, saw its 'hills flattened and the lakes filled in order to create rice paddies to provision [the Taiping] regime',⁴⁵ in line with other repurposing of literati gardens: many were subdivided, converted to fields and pasture, and had their trees felled and buildings stripped to provide firewood and construction materials. Rockeries were broken up, to be used as infill, even as some fortunate pieces were saved and moved to other collections. Many historically important gardens survived only because their prestige facilitated their conversion into palaces for the Taiping elite, notably the Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou, which was nonetheless later subdivided and used for other purposes, to the extent that what exists today is a mostly 20th-century reconstitution of a possible Ming dynasty condition (Fig.17).



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In the postwar reconstruction, gardens contained fragmented meanings for different groups, either as sites to revive the former glories and loftiness of pre-war life, or else as sites of mourning and conversions to shrines for the war dead. As with the example of Huangshan, the prestige perception of entire cities could shift: Yangzhou, formerly the more famous city for its gardens, lost its status to Suzhou, aided by the latter's later rail connection to the burgeoning entrepôt at Shanghai. Further forward to the post-reform present of mass tourism, gardens are marketed as a consumable past, signifiers for a timeless national aesthetic or a psycho-geographical symbol for *Jiangnan*, with a laboriously maintained 'newness' that washes over their often-troubled histories.

Despite the apparent paradox of the Chinese garden's superficial newness and its claims to a direct connection to a past from 300 years ago, an understanding of these gardens' histories allows us to see them as 'live' works undergoing constant construction and deconstruction, a process that stretches back to, but has outstripped, the 'original'. This can be seen in the light of Byung-Chul Han's analysis of *zhenji*, the classical Chinese term for 'original', translated as 'authentic trace', whereby 'the original is determined not by a unique act of creation, but by unending change, not by definitive identity, but by unending process'.⁴⁶ Most clearly seen in literati painting, the more a piece is admired, the more it is overwritten, rather



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than preserved, through recropping, rehangng, and the addition of new poems, inscriptions, and the stamps of *xianzhan*, collector's seals, so that the original is always a fluid entity without the finality of a single author's signature (see Fig.18). This is a 'sedimentary', as in accumulative and changing, history whose traces can be read less in the material present than in its layered reconstructions and re-imaginings in the literary corpus. Even in the actual use of contemporary Chinese gardens we see departures from clichéd understandings of their existence as simple sites of a curated past: elderly visitors and families gather together for picnics, placing their food on balustrades; others conduct their morning exercise, while some visitors stage photos for their social media profiles. What we see as a historical garden is an accretive collection of later interpretations, sometimes simply a public space to be enjoyed, whilst other examples remain literally buried under the earth. Perhaps, in contemplating scholar's rocks, just as the early writers on *sangtian* surmised, we should be reminded that they too, over the span of human – let alone geological – time, are not eternal.

Still Dreaming, Still Moving

Tall mountains and flowing water remain a powerful metaphor within contemporary architectural practice, reimagined such that Ma Yansong may refer to his parametric architecture as a *shanshui* city, or Wang Shu see the rooftop of his Ningbo Museum as evoking mountain valleys. Despite parametricism's account of itself as a bio-metaphorical reality of flows and swarms, despite even the oft-repeated ideas of 'permeability' and 'porosity' as the architectural ground for democratic life, where authentic encounters happen in the in-between spaces, such literal formal translations of nature or geological phenomena into architecture are at best inadequate in addressing the contentious issues of environmental damage, social displacement and control. Rather, the idea of the hyper-real, or personal 'sur-real', inherent in the historical readings of scholar's rocks and gardens, is subversive on an individual and immaterial level because it does not depend entirely on a rigid material reality: cultural ideas and practice define its value. It is important at the same time to remember that however far our imaginations may take us, material objects have material consequences, as illustrated by Huizong's poetic decadence and eventual ignominy. Perhaps, as Andrea Bachner has noted, all spaces are products of the real and the imaginary, and 'ours is no longer (or indeed might never have been) an age of the simulacrum that cunningly disparages and supersedes reality. Ours is an age in which reality no longer needs to operate with such a binary because it itself has become multifaceted and, indeed, multimedial.'⁴⁷ In perceiving the paradisaical and magical qualities of scholar's rocks, and their counter-intuitive embodiment of gaseous movement and change, we see a material culture built on an expansive symbiosis between the material real and the subjective cultural imaginary, a metaphor for an architecture that, rather than being confined through prescribed interpretations and linear narratives, becomes open.

- 1 See Yan Zhenqing, 'Magu Shanxian Tanji', in Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 6 vols (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1954–2006), III (1959), 599–600.
- 2 Li Shizhen, *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, trans. Paul U. Unschuld (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), II, 225.
- 3 Yan Zhengqing makes an explicitly geological connection in referring to seashells seen atop Mount Magu, theorising that the land must have been under water.
- 4 The term 'red dust' referred to the bustling mortal world, and the pursuit of wealth and status, with the goal of self-cultivation being the ability to 'see through the red dust'.
- 5 Shih-Shan Susan Huang, *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2012), 116.
- 6 Wolfgang Bauer, trans. Michael Shaw, *China and the Search for Happiness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 195.
- 7 Franciscus Verellen, 'The Beyond Within: Grotto-Heavens in Taoist Ritual and Cosmology', *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 8:1 (1995), 268.
- 8 Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 91–93.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 10 Li Wai-Yee, 'Gardens and Illusions from Late Ming to Early Qing', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 72:2 (December 2012), 320.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 320.
- 12 Rolf Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52.
- 13 Bai Juyi, 'Cao Tang Ji', in *Bai Juyi Ji*, ed. Gu Xuejie (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1996), 43.933–935, cited in Li Wai-Yee, *op. cit.*, 320.
- 14 For more on this tale, see Verellen, *op. cit.*, 282; and Stein, *op. cit.*, 52–53.
- 15 Li Wai-Yee, *op. cit.*, 321.
- 16 Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism in Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and The Journey to the West* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).
- 17 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 18 Duncan Campbell, 'Qi Biaojia's "Footnotes to Allegory Mountain": Introduction and Translation', *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, 19:3–4 (1999), 251.
- 19 Xu Shen, *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963), I.I/7a, cited in Jing Wang, *op. cit.*, 69.
- 20 Stanislaus Fung, 'Here and There in the Yuan Ye', *Design Philosophy Papers*, 1:6 (2003), 311.
- 21 Li Bai, 'Sitting Alone on Jongting Mountain', in Hans H. Frankel, *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
- 22 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 61.
- 23 John Hay, 'Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Rocks and Art', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 13 (Spring 1987), 13.
- 24 Su Shi, 'Poems on Paintings: Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien', trans. Ronald Egan, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 43:2 (December 1983), 422.
- 25 氣韻生動. For a detailed analysis see Téa Sernelj, 'The Problem of the Authenticity of the Aesthetic Concept *qiyun shengdong*: Xu Fuguan's Analysis and Interpretation', in *Asian Studies*, 9.1 (2021), 159–80.
- 26 Jing Wang, *op. cit.*, 92.
- 27 Jerome Silbergeld, 'Beyond Suzhou: Region and Memory in the Gardens of Sichuan', *The Art Bulletin*, 86:2 (June 2004), 208.
- 28 See the collection of essays in Robert D. Mowry, ed., *Worlds within Worlds: The Richard Rosenblum Collection of Chinese Scholar's Rocks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 1997).
- 29 See Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
- 30 Ji Cheng, *Yuan Ye Xu*, in Huang Changmei, ed., *Yuan Ye* (Hong Kong: Yanyuan Shuwu, 1987), 18–19, translation cited in Li Wai-Yee, *op. cit.*, 318.
- 31 Kiyohiko Munataka, 'Mysterious Heavens and Chinese Classical Gardens', in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 15 (Spring, 1988), 61–88.
- 32 Su Shi, *Jiuhua Hu Zhong Shi* (Mount Jiuhua in a jar), translation cited in Munataka, *op. cit.*, 67.
- 33 Li Wai-Yee, *op. cit.*, 322.
- 34 Campbell, *op. cit.*, 262.
- 35 Fei Si-yen, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Centre, 2009), 124–25.
- 36 Hongnam Kim, 'The Dream Journey in Chinese Landscape Art: Zong Bin to Cheng Zhengkui', *Asian Art*, 3:4 (Fall 1990), 13–14.
- 37 Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 134–35.
- 38 See the chapter by Kristina Kleutghen, 'Peacocks and Cave Heavens', in *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 143–77.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 40 Fei Si-yen, *op. cit.*, 163.
- 41 Laurie J. Monahan, 'Finessing the Found: 20th Century Encounters with the "Natural" Object', *Oriental Art*, 44:1 (1998), 40.
- 42 See the article by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, 'Hyperreal Monuments of the Mind: Traditional Chinese Architecture and Disneyland', *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, 23.2 (Spring 2012), 7–17.
- 43 Pierre Ryckmans, 'The Chinese Attitude Toward the Past', *China Heritage Quarterly*, 14 (June 2008). http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=014_chineseattitude.inc&issue=014 [accessed 20/03/2022].
- 44 Li Wai-Yee, *op. cit.*, 304.
- 45 Tobie Meyer-Fong, 'Civil War, Revolutionary Heritage, and the Chinese Garden', *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 4:1 (May 2015), 314.
- 46 Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 11.
- 47 Andrea Bachner, 'Theses on the Translation of (Chinese) Architecture', *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, 2:1 (Spring 2016), 124.

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1— A record of an otherwise lost 18th-century garden, whose histories involve destruction and constant transformation. Anon., after Yuan Jiang, *View of the Mountain Villa*, 18th century. Handscroll; ink and colour on silk, 52.1 x 295cm. Acc. no. 1982.461, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Family Collection, Gift of Constance Tang Fong, in honour of her mother, Mrs P.Y. Tang, 1982.

2— A Daoist priest's vestment as cosmic diagram. Here the celestial palace at the centre, associated with the North Star, is surrounded by constellations, the sun and moon, and the Five Great Mountains in the form of abstract ideograms. Anon., *Daoist Priest's Robe (Daopao)*, 1821–50. Silk robe. Acc. no. 42.8.118, Minneapolis Institute of Art, The John R. Van Derlip Fund. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/16976/daoist-priests-robe-china> [accessed 22/04/2022].

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3— Waterfalls and caverns were particularly admired as the sources of water; a possible reading is a reference to the magical portal from the *Peach Blossom Spring*. Detail from Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, *Joint Landscape*, c.1509 and 1546. Handscroll; ink on paper, 36.8 x 1729.3cm. Acc. no. 1990.54, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1990.

4— Immortals and their attendants revel within a dream-like, shifting landscape, supposedly contained within a jar. Excerpt from Gong Kai, *Merry Gatherings in the Magic Jar*, late 13th century. Handscroll; ink on paper, 29.8 x 431.8cm. Acc. no. 24.44, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1924.

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5— A small courtyard between the larger garden and scholar's studios, making use of moon-doors. *Yipu* (The Garden of Cultivation), Suzhou, July 2020. Photo: author.

6— The Buddhist *arhat*, or *luohan* in China, are seen as the original disciples of Gautama Buddha, often depicted resting against trees and rocks. Detail from Wu Bin, *The Sixteen Luohans*, 1591. Handscroll; ink and colour on paper, 32.1 x 415.4cm. Acc. no. 1986.266.4, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Edward Elliott Family Collection, Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1986.

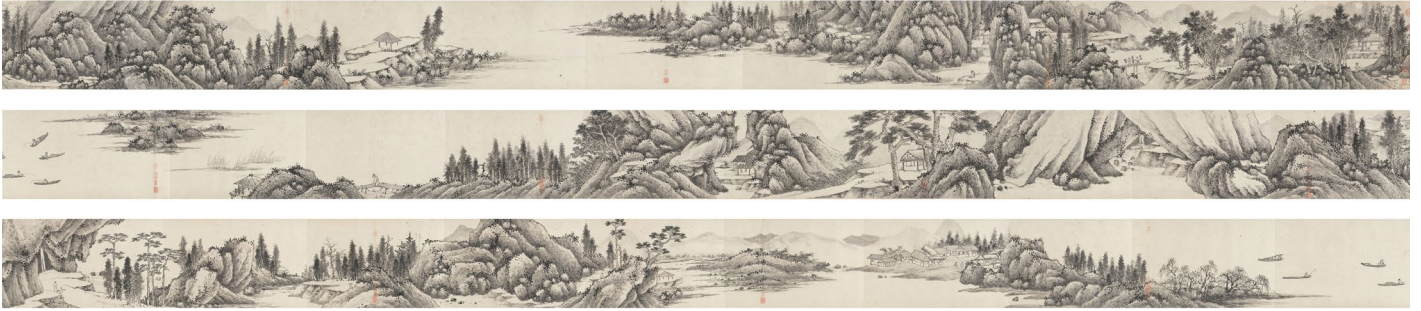


An arrangement of rocks against the white garden wall. *Liuyuan* (The Lingering Garden), Suzhou, July 2020.
Photo: author.



A pitted limestone specimen exhibiting leanness, folding and porosity. Anon., *Scholar's Rock*, 19th century. Limestone, wooden stand, 61.9cm x 41.3cm x 28.6cm (overall, with stand). Acc. no. 2008.674a & b, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Richard Rosenblum Family, 2008.

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9— The scholar Shen Zhou preferred to live in seclusion rather than to take part in bureaucratic service; his work is a translation in landscape of his interior imagination and mind. Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, *Joint Landscape*, c.1509 and 1546. Handscroll; ink on paper, 36.8 x 1729.3cm. Acc. no. 1990.54, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1990.

10— Though the original garden, the archetypal Tang era garden estate, and the painting by Wang Wei are lost, its composition survives in re-representations, copies and various poems. Anon., *Wangchuan Villa*, 16th–17th century. Handscroll; ink and colour on silk, 31.8 x 490.2cm. Acc. no. 13.220.5. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913.



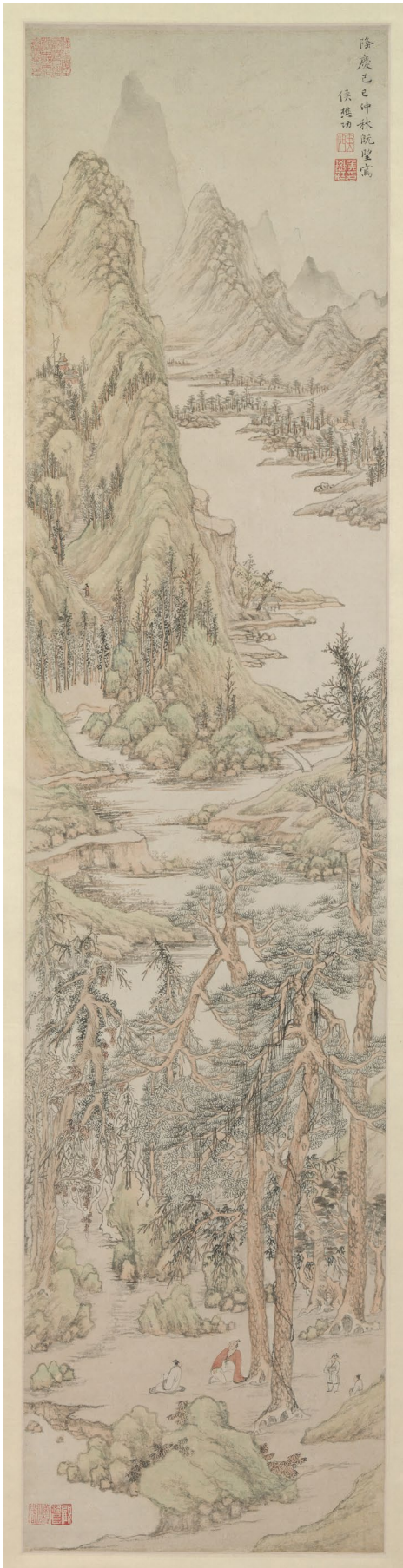
A 'cave-door' in the garden compound leads to an otherworldly gathering place in the form of a grotto. *Canglangting* (The Surging Waves Pavilion), Suzhou, September 2020. Photo: author.



A meandering pathway together with multiple doorways and overlapping windows. *Liuyuan* (The Linger Garden), Suzhou, July 2020. Photo: author.



A rockery with a passage underneath becomes a stairway to the first storey, evoking the clouds. *Wangshiyuan* (The Master of Nets Garden), Suzhou, July 2020. Photo: author.



A hanging scroll of a mountainous landscape, with paths, rivers and figures, that allows the eye to wander from the bottom to the top of the composition. Typically, a single perspective is discarded in favour of a slow unfolding. Hou Maogong, *High Mountains*, 1569. Hanging scroll; ink and colour on paper, 118.4 x 27.9 cm. Acc. no. 1989.363.82, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of John M. Crawford Jr., 1988.



The growth in popularity and prestige of tourist sites was aided by travelogues and painted albums such as this, which catalogues scenic spots on Huangshan leaf by leaf. Zheng Min, *Eight Views of Huangshan*, 1681. Album of nine leaves of painting and calligraphy; ink on paper, leaf (a): 31.1 x 37.1cm (overall with mounting), leaves (b-h): 30.8 x 36.5cm (overall with mounting), leaves (i) and (j): 37.1 x 31.1cm (overall with mounting). Acc. no. 2012.167a-l, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift and Susan Dillon Gift, in honour of James C.Y. Watt, 2012.



The view of the Beisi Pagoda from the Humble Administrator's Garden, much extolled in historic literature, but both mostly 20th-century reconstructions. *Zhuozhengyuan* (The Humble Administrator's Garden), Suzhou, September 2019. Photo: author.



A walkway, newly repainted and retiled. *Liuyuan* (The Lingering Garden), Suzhou, July 2020. Photo: author.



Qian Xuan, a Song loyalist, following the Mongol conquest, depicts himself on a boat unmoored from the troubles of officialdom. The dreamlike composition has been altered over its 500-year history through the addition of collector's seals; an original in constant development. Anon., after Qian Xuan, *Ode on Returning Home*, 14th–15th century. Handscroll; ink, colour, and gold on paper, 106.7 x 26cm. Acc. no. 13.220.124, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913.