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Fangting Gu April 10th, 2024

The Tradition of Spiritual Continuity: the Reconstruction of Suzhou's Inept Administrator's Garden

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Abstract

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By Fangting Gu

This thesis investigates Suzhou's Inept Administrator's Garden, especially its modern perception as the finest specimen of Chinese tradition. Although widespread, this claim accepted by authoritative organizations and Literati Garden scholars is rarely deconstructed and investigated and requires more nuanced to be added to be fully valid. By looking at the garden's appearance across history by comparing its initial design in the Ming Dynasty by Wu School Artist Wen Zhengming and its modern appearance constructed by 1950s Suzhou Literati Garden Reconstruction Committee. it is physical inauthentic. However, investigation reveals both groups intended to maintain the sense of inept (拙 *zhuo*) through garden design. The paradox hence arises: How can a garden embed literati's aspirations and the Ming Dynasty tradition when it is not even physically authentic?

This thesis aims to tackle this paradox by comparing Wen Zhengming's Garden of Inept Administrator to the modern Inept Administrator's Garden and claim that the apparent disconnect between the modern Inept Administrator's Garden and its depiction in paintings from the time of its creation demonstrate that contemporary Chinese ideas of authenticity when it comes to built space and objects relies on a continuity of spirit rather than any direct physical continuity.

To investigate the garden's initial appearance intended by Wen Zhengming, a formal analysis is performed on his painting Garden of the Inept Administrator, specifically focusing on his arrangement of formal elements, the figure's placement and actions, and the exclusion of stone rockeries. To analyze the 1950s reconstruction committee's decisions that resulted in the modern garden, summer field research, an interview with the reconstruction director, and a secondary literature review are used.

Upon delineating the disparities between the original designer's intentions and the choices made by modern-day restorers, the paper will explore the reason underlying the differences between the garden's appearance in the Ming Dynasty and its current look. This will eventually explain how a Chinese garden continues to embed Chinese tradition despite its "formal" and "material inauthenticity."

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Introduction

Standing in front of this concrete giant, its curvature effortlessly mimics the fluidity of water, hence strikingly surreal. Through the hole in its body, I glimpse the tranquil garden landscape lying on the other side of the river. How can a rock look as soft as water, but arouse this feeling of sublime? Encompassing and interacting with the garden where it locates, what stories is it trying to tell through the seeming imperfection? As Maggie Keswick wrote in her book *The Chinese Garden: History, Art & Architecture,* "Chinese history is littered with the corpses of gardens."[1] Indeed, the essence of Chinese cultural history is not only captured at the time of the garden's creation, but also persists in modern society's perception of the gardens.[2] In other words, investigating the gardens' present states offer insights into contemporary Chinese society's perception of past cultural traditions. But how do gardens convey these traditions? What criteria can we use to assess the garden's effectiveness at communicating these traditions? And what do all these inquiries uncover about modern Chinese perceptions of tradition?

This paper explores these questions by investigating Chinese modern society's perception of cultural authenticity focusing on the Inept Administrator's Garden (拙政园 *Zhuo Zheng Yuan*), one of the fifty Suzhou Literati Gardens that, although vastly studied by Literati Garden scholars like Xie Xiaosi, Chen Congzhou, Wu Zeming, Cheng Hongfu, allow more nuances to be added.[3] Hinted by the garden's name, ineptitude (拙 *zhuo*) is the garden's main theme. As mentioned in Dao De Jing, the greatest perfection exhibits imperfection and

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[1] Keswick, *The Chinese garden*, 43.
[2] "Modern" here refers to the China's modern history starting from 1949 till present, characterizing Chinese society from the start of the establishment of People's Republic of China. This time frame is chosen not only because it signifies a drastic shift in Chinese society from wartime to post-war, but is also when the Suzhou Literati Garden Renovation Committee was established. Starting from this time, Chinese people regained the focus in cultural preservation and established new perspectives on gardens conservation, along with the history that came with them. Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 5.
[3]UNESCO World Heritage Center. "Classical Gardens of Suzhou."

the greatest skill appears inept. (大成若缺, 大巧若拙)[4] In this conception, skillfulness represents ingenuity as it represents one is overwise, and ineptitude is the natural state that one ought to follow.[5] The Ming literatis, highly influenced by Daoism philosophy as they were, views the concept of *zhuo* accordingly and implements it into garden design, aiming to construct a refined garden by expressing ineptitude.

Aiming to restore the gardens' past glory after destruction by war, the Chinese central government nominated Xie Xiaosi as the director of the newly formed Suzhou Literati Garden Reconstruction Committee in 1951.[6] The reconstruction of the Inept Administrator's Gardens was their first project.[7] However, due to the lack of historical records and relevant scholarship on the Inept Administrator's Garden since its establishment in 1509, the renovation committee had very limited authoritative guidelines on Literati Garden reconstruction.[8] The only sources available were paintings that did not strictly illustrate the gardens as they appeared in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), for instance, Wen Zhengming's *Garden of Inept Administrator* and Shen De's *Records of the Orchid Snow Hall*.[9] As a result of the paucity in existing primary sources, the studies are often narrowly focused, either on the garden's formal designs as representations of Chinese traditional gardens or on the reconstruction details, illustrating the garden's post-reconstruction appearance.[10]

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[4] Laozi, Dao De Jing, translated by John C.H.Wu, 92.
[5] The concept of the natural state will be explained later in Chapter 3.
[6] Zemin Wu, Contemporary History of Chinese Gardens, 159.
[7] Ibid, 157.
[8] Chinese historiography does not write time in Gregorian dates. The Inept Administrator's Garden's establishment is often recorded as 明正德四年, translated as "The fourth year under Emperor Zhengde's reign in Ming Dynasty." Emperor Zhengde ascended in 1505, and the numerical transcription often starts with the year 1506. So the Inept Administrator's Garden's establishment time is transcribed here as 1509. Xie Xiaosi, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 130.
Starting from around 2700 B.C., warfare in China continued until 1945, during which countless valuable pieces of literature were destroyed. In addition, the most recent anti-literacy movement – the Cultural Revolution – happened from 1966 to 1976, eliminating almost all classics and historical records, including those pertinent to the Literati Garden's past appearance and story. More on warfare's influence on Literati Gardens' lack of historical records, see Zemin Wu, *Contemporary History of Chinese Gardens*, 167.
[9] Xie, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 131.
[10] One example of the former scholarship is Liu, Lihong's "Path, Place, and Pace in Mid-Ming Suzhou Landscape Painting," where Ming Dynasty Wu School Literati are introduced, the corresponding (either painting or built by the literati) Literati Garden Painting's techniques explicated, and effects and significances discussed. One example of the latter is Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* one of the

Nevertheless, despite limited research focus, sources show tendencies among reputable organizations and scholars to equate the garden's historical convention with its perception in modern society, taking the garden as an authentic representation of "Chinese tradition" for granted.[11] According to UNESCO Cultural Heritage website, Suzhou Municipal People's government advertisement, and major scholars, the Inept Administrator's Garden is the "typical representative" of past Chinese culture, the "finest specimen" of Suzhou traditional garden, and the "finest remnants of ancient Chinese intellectuals."[12] However, despite making such big and influential claims that practically influence the garden's modern perception, more nuances can be added to their claims. Specifically, there is a noticeable gap in explanation regarding how a garden embeds literati's aspirations and the Ming Dynasty tradition when it is not even physically authentic, since one would expect an authentic garden to look like its historical counterparts.

This thesis endeavors to unravel this paradox by comparing Wen Zhengming's *Garden of Inept Administrator* to the modern Inept Administrator's Garden, arguing that the apparent disconnect between the modern Inept Administrator's Garden and its depiction in paintings from the time of its creation demonstrates that contemporary Chinese ideas of cultural authenticity when it comes to built space and objects relies on a tradition of inheriting the continuity of spirit rather than any direct physical continuity.

This paper will investigate whether the Inept Administrator's Garden faithfully reflects the tradition as discussed in three parts: the garden's initial appearance as intended by the Ming Dynasty designer, its current appearance, and the historical and philosophical underpinnings of Chinese culture that led to this disparity. In the first section, the gardens'

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most influential and complete study of the Garden focusing on the Literati Gardens' contemporary appearance and the reconstruction process that led to their current look.

[11] One example is Liu and Wood, "The Traditional Gardens of Suzhou."

[12] The Inept Administrator's Garden has been listed as a World Heritage during the UNESCO 1997 World Heritage Convention, and in 2019 its annual tourist number reached five million. Suzhou Inept Administrator's Garden Management and Protection Documentary 2020. UNESCO 1997 World Heritage Convention.

initial look will be introduced by analyzing Wen's painting mentioned above. Wen's purposeful arrangement of architectural elements and human figures, as well as his intentional omission of stone rockeries, will be focused on.

Subsequently, the painting will be compared with the garden's present-day appearance, drawing on observations from field research conducted in July 2023 and an interview with the current director of the Inept Administrator's Garden Stone Rockeries Restoration Department. This comparison will reveal that the majority of differences in their formal appearance were caused by reconstruction operations initiated in 1951. It will also illustrate that many restoration choices were influenced by the aesthetic preferences of contemporary designers, rather than a commitment to historical precision or the original designer's intentions.[13]

Upon delineating the disparities between the original designer's intentions and the choices made by modern-day restorers, the paper will explore the reason underlying the differences between the garden's appearance in Ming Dynasty and its current look. This will eventually explain how a Chinese garden continues to embed Chinese tradition despite its "formal" and "material inauthenticity."[14] Central discussions will include the paramount importance of abstractness in landscape painting, the use of *Xieyi* technique to express abstract concepts, and an emphasis on capturing the spirit of objects over their exact physical or material depiction. This suggests that true fidelity to the original design and Chinese tradition may also abide more by the objects and space's spiritual underpinning rather than formal appearance.[15]

Assessing ways in which contemporary Chinese perceive any built space or physical objects as authentic entails an explication of what "tradition" and "authenticity" mean, terms

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[13] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 157.
[14] "Formal" and "material authenticity" are in parentheses to highlight their contextual use in this paper, which will be explained later.
[15] Gilloch, Graeme, et Jaeho Kang. "Ink-Play": Walter Benjamin's Chinese Curios, 126.

commonly employed by archeologists and historians when assessing whether objects are representative of their culture and whether their present appearance matches their initial form.[16] However, since both words are often re-appropriated and redefined by context, defining them in the context of Suzhou Literati Garden is essential. Scholars of Literati Gardens often refer to "tradition" in two distinct senses. Xie Xiaosi contends in his work *The Record of Suzhou Gardens* that the Inept Administrator's Garden, by mirroring the city's political, economic, and cultural shifts across various eras, is the essence of Suzhou's historical and cultural heritage, attending its zenith in the contemporary society.[17] He advocates incorporating China's modernizing trends into tradition garden design during reconstruction.[18] Echoing Xie's perspective, Wu Zeming, in his *Contemporary History of Chinese Gardens,* asserts that"Although we have always been viewing Chinese classical gardens as cultural heritages to pass on, they have lost their ground for development in modern urbanized developments. Now that we have recovered and reconstructed the popular gardens, we can transmit the classical gardens abroad. [These] are all acts of inheriting the tradition."[19] By highlighting contemporary designs of parts of the garden not suggested by the *Crafts of Garden* as evidence that the modern garden design adapting to modern society, Wu clearly conveys his perception of the current Inept Administrator's Garden as an authentic Chinese traditional garden.

In contrast, Chen Congzhou, a leading art historian insisting that the modern garden should be redesigned strictly according to the paintings, the gardens' intended historical glory and cultural tradition can only be sufficiently expressed by reconstructing the garden's physical appearance.[20] The painting's unrealistic conventions do not impede the painting from

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[16] Zhu, Authenticity and Heritage Conservation in China: Translation, Interpretation, Practices, 187.
[17] Xie, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 113.
[18] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 173.
[19] Ibid, 7.
[20] Chen Congzhou, Key member of the 1950s Garden renovation committee. Quote from Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 166.

communicating the designers' essential ideas and concurrent traditions, and such difficulty should not be the excuse for failing to distinguish the garden's authentically intended and re-appropriated appearance. Hence, to better investigate modern Chinese society's perception of the past tradition, this paper clearly separates the scholarly unexamined "traditional Suzhou Literati Garden" into two timeframes – their intended, or original, appearance in the Ming Dynasty and their current appearance.[21] While Chen claims that the garden's tradition should be the closest approximation of Ming Dynasty tradition which is Wen Zhengming's intention, Xie and Wu assert that the garden is traditional as long as it pertains to the 21st-century perception of a traditional garden, which can be deciphered from reconstruction committee's decisions. Therefore, analyzing the Ming garden alongside its modern counterpart requires distinguishing these two interpretations of tradition, enabling a legitimate examination of how the garden's present state compares with its historical depiction.

While the definition of authenticity is also highly contextual, this paper focuses on its meaning often used by Chinese scholars.[22] According to Zhu Yujie, a "Chinese understanding of the notion of authenticity" encapsulates both the subject's originality and verifiability – the former entails only the realness of the object's initial state, and the latter includes the object's subsequent historical development.[23] The claim that the modern garden is physically inauthentic is made in agreement with Zhu's definition of authenticity, that after historical development, the object, which in this case, the garden, no longer pertains to the realness of its initial state in the Ming Dynasty. In other words, it looks different now.

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[21] "Unexamined" here means the scholars often mix the two definitions of tradition, as explained in previous paragraphs. For more details regarding the scholarly debates, go to Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens* and Chen Congzhou's *Shuoyuan.*

[22] Zhu concludes and summarizes two definitions of authenticity from two camps of authors who approached "authenticity" from two different perspectives. For more information about the authors and their definition of authenticity, see Zhu, Yujie. "Authenticity and Heritage Conservation in China: Translation, Interpretation, Practices." 189.

[23] Ibid.

As mentioned, *zhuo* is the garden's central theme, hence this thesis will focus on analyzing how Wen Zhengming and the 1950s reconstruction committee respectively intended to convey this abstract idea through garden design. Since the two gardens in different time periods are currently exhibited in different forms – the Ming garden in painting and the modern garden as an interactive space with architecture – the methods used to analyze the gardens are different. Formal analysis will be used to introduce Wen's intention and the garden's historical appearance, and summer field research, an interview with the reconstruction director, and secondary literature reviews will be used to decipher the 1950s reconstruction committee's intention, hence the garden's modern appearance.

Chapter 1

Wu School Paintings and Garden Designers' Intentions

The Wu School of Art, a school of art practiced by the literati of Suzhou during the mid-Ming dynasty (late 15th century to early 16th century), is renowned for its brush and ink *Shanshui* (landscape painting). One of its most unique themes is the depictions of Suzhou Literati Gardens, as these pieces not only offer meticulous illustrations of garden landscapes but also embody Chinese Daoist philosophy, reflecting the artists' aspirations and contemplations. Thus, analyzing Literati Garden paintings allows for an understanding of the artists' objectives and the cultural traditions they aimed to express.

This section will focus on the Inept Administrator's Garden as depicted by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), a pivotal figure in the Wu School of Art and the designer of the Inept Administrator's Garden.[24] Many aspects of this painting are worth exploring. As mentioned, while many elements of his work merit attention, this section will specifically examine the theme of *zhuo* as portrayed in the garden and its eponymous painting, *Garden of the Inept Administrator*. This focus aims to explore how the painting succeeds in transmitting the artist's intended messages and aspirations.

The Chinese Approach to Art

It is necessary to first explain this paper's approach to analyzing the painting. Zhuang Zi (476-221 BC), a foundational figure in Daoism, was generally thought to be the author of the text named after him, which has had a profound influence on Chinese philosophy and aesthetics.[25] According to him, true beauty cannot be deliberately analyzed, and if a viewer tries to interpret and decipher aesthetic clues actively, they cannot decrypt the truest beauty of

[24] Henderson, The Humble Administrator's Garden, 42.
[25] Fang, *Zhuang Zi*, 4.

the subject.[26] *Zhuo* is an abstract theme not conventionally used for solid architectural design, and its message was intended to be received by an immersive experience in the garden. Understanding the painting as it would have been perceived during the Ming Dynasty involves engaging with it beyond analyzing the purpose behind each detail and brushstroke. Instead, it requires immersing oneself in the artwork, forming a connection with it, and experiencing its essence.[27] However, given that we are neither directly viewing the painting nor visiting the garden, achieving this level of engagement with the painting is not possible. Therefore, this chapter will follow Li Zhijian's approach to the analysis used in his paper "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," one that explores the concept of ineptitude by deconstructing the painting's visual language, including the spatial arrangement of objects and human figures, the focus highlighted in each panel, and the relationships between panels.[28]

Zhuo **Through Formal Arrangements**

Wen Zhengming designed the Inept Administrator's Garden under the commission of Wang Xianchen, who had been removed from the imperial court and wished to return to Suzhou and live a tranquil life ever since.[29] The garden was built as a place where he would spend the rest of his life and a reminder to restrain from over-performance and live a life of ineptitude, refraining from over-performance and humbleness.

While generally understood as a shortcoming, *zhuo* is considered a strength in Daoism. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the original expression of such an idea can be found in *Dao De Jing* 道德经, a foundational Daoism text renowned for its paradoxical

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[26] Fang, *Zhuang Zi*, 4.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Li Zhijian, professor in Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, who is also a Brush and ink landscape painter. Li, "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," 21-23.
[29] Xie, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 130. For Wang Xianchen's biography, see Shusen Qiu, *Zhongguo Li Dai Zhi Guan Ci Dian* (Taibei Shi: Shang ding wen hua chu ban she, 1999), 813.

insights. According to Laozi, “The greatest perfection seems imperfect, And yet its use is inexhaustible. The greatest fullness seems empty, And yet its use is endless. The greatest straightness looks like crookedness. The greatest skill appears clumsy.”[30] 大成若缺，其用不弊。大盈若冲，其用不穷。大直若屈，大巧若拙 (*zhuo*). In Daoism, skillfulness or cleverness are seen as manifestations of deliberate contrivance. They represent a departure from the simplicity and spontaneity of one's natural state. Being overly skillful, hence, overly wise, often entails manipulation, which can disrupt the natural balance and harmony advocated by Daoism. *Zhuo* (ineptitude), in this context, does not denote the idea of stupidity or incompetence but rather an embrace of simplicity and spontaneity. It is hence not a means to limit the designer’s skills, but an abstract and poetic imagery that is to be expressed and embraced.

Wen Zhengming intended to incorporate the poetic essence of *zhuo* with the characteristics of the garden’s owner, Master Wang Xianchen, who chose the garden’s name from a poem written hundreds of years ago prior to the garden's construction – Pan Yue’s *Xian Ju Fu* 闲居赋 "The Ode of Idle Life.” The poem writes:

> “Therefore, I accept the boundaries of where I can stop and rest, and pursue the aspirations of drifting clouds. I build a house and plant trees, finding joy and contentment in leisure. My pond is sufficient for fishing, and pounding grain is enough to replace farming. I prepare simple meals of gruel and vegetables for my daily sustenance; I raise sheep and make cheese to provide for the needs of summer and winter. I am filial in my duty, and a friend to my brothers. This, too, is my way of administering in ineptness. Thus, I compose a poem about my idle life, to express and fulfill my feelings.”[31]

[30] Laozi, Dao De Jing, translated by John C.H.Wu, 92.
[31] Xian Ju Fu describes the life of Pan Yue, who returned to the capital from Chang'an to serve as a scholar. Due to his mother's illness, he resigned from his official position at the age of fifty. Reflecting on his thirty years of life as a government official, with its ups and downs, he became disillusioned and developed a desire to retire to a rural life. Source from Zhenpeng Chen and Peiheng Zhang, *Gu Wen Jian Shang Ci Dian* (Shanghai: Shanghai ci shu chu ban she, 1997), 541-547.

Master Wang aligned his own experiences with the poet's "administering in ineptness" 此亦拙(*zhuo*)者之为政也, hence using this phrase for his garden's name as a reflection on his disaffection with the imperial court and his resolve to embrace a distant rural life.[32] Hence, Wen expresses the idea of *zhuo* through deliberate choices of architectural arrangement and the actions of human figures, creating an atmosphere of serenity, subtlety, exclusion, and a tranquil and secluded lifestyle.

The Inept Administrator's Garden was painted by Wen Zhengming in 1535, around two decades after the commencement of the garden's construction (Fig.1). The artwork is segmented into eight connected yet individual panels (Leaf h-g-d-c-f-e-b-a).[33] Each panel, from a to h, showcases a distinct scene within the garden: Leaf a features the Fragrant Grove (繁香坞 *Fan Xiang Wu*); Leaf b the Little Canglang (小沧浪 *Xiao Canglang*); Leaf the Fishing Port (钓砻 *Diao Gong*); Leaf f the Bird Haven (来禽囿 *Lai Qin You*); Leaf e the Tranquil Bamboo Grove (湘筠坞 *Xiang Jun Wu*); Leaf d the Plantain Railing (芭蕉槛 *Ba Jiao Lan*); Leaf g the Jade Spring (玉泉 *Yu Quan*); and Leaf h the Locust Canopy (槐幄 *Huai Wu*) (Fig.2).[34] Despite the diversity in drawing perspectives across the sections, the sequence is identifiable through various visual indicators, and Wen's approach to expressing the theme of *zhuo* is consistently applied throughout the panels.

Viewing the paintings from right to left, starting with Leaf a, the central pavilion (the Fragrant Grove) is ensconced amidst trees and water. Its front and back are shielded from the

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[32] Zhang, National Cultural Heritage Protection List Catalog.

[33] *The Garden of the Inept Administrator* is currently in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The labeling of each panel is derived from the MET's collection page. The painting is intended to be viewed from right to left, starting with Leaf a, aligning with traditional Chinese reading and viewing directions. To ensure the analysis mirrors the intended viewing experience, it will progress from the panels on the right to those on the left (from a to h). Originally, each panel was paired with a calligraphy panel that detailed the geographical location of the scene within the garden. However, as the focus of this paper is not on the calligraphic elements, these panels are omitted from Fig.1. For more information on how the painting should be viewed, see the MET's collection page: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39654

[34] Translations consults Roderick Whitfield's translation in *In Pursuit of Antiquity: Chinese Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties* from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse. Exh. cat. Edited and performed minor changes.

external world by barriers, including a fence, a line of trees, and a surrounding lake, creating a secluded anchorage (Fig. 3).

Based on the visual clues, Lead b seems like an extension from Lead a observing from a perspective after crossing the bridge on the left of Lead a. (Fig. 3). Intriguingly, the end of the bridge does not align directly with the opening in the wall; rather, it is oriented away from the entrance. When one crosses the bridge to reach the chamber, they are physically closer to it, yet, spatially, slowly drifting away. Such an installation choice functions similarly to the labyrinth in Leaf c, where the viewer encounters a labyrinth that zigzags towards an undefined destination as the road ends with the border of the image (Fig. 6). Both scenes illustrate a space where the pathway, though leading to one possible destination, diverts the walker in various directions prior to reaching the chambers, conveying a deliberate disorientation to demonstrates indirectness.[35] Similarly, in Leaf c, the main chamber is at the far end of the frame, distanced from both the entrance and the viewer. Adjacent to the aforementioned labyrinth, the path to this chamber remains indirect. Here, the artist depicts a space wherein an imagined visitor needs to walk through a round-shaped gate carved into a wall, an installation exists on both sides of the wall and hence clearly suggests that this path is the only access to the chamber. By effectively separating the chamber from the external world, Wen deliberately articulates a theme of seclusion.[36]

Building on the conveyance of indirectness and seclusion in previous panels, Wen Zhengming further illustrates the concept of *zhuo* in Leaf d by placing a rock in front of a plain shed. This arrangement of the rock not only obscures the activities within the shed but also restricts access to it (Fig.7).[37] The rock effectively separates the space inside the shed and the wild land outside, creating a space where the activity performed in the former space can

[35] Li, "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," 21.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

only be seen from certain angles. Unlike the previous panels, this scene exhibits no indications of any labyrinth or paths that may lead one to this shed, which suggests that, at least in Wen's portrayal of the space, the shed may not be intended to be directly accessed.

Other than the absence of direct access, the shed's positioning between the wall and the rock further reinforces the sense of ineptitude. The rock is located in the front of the shed, blocking its right half, partially concealing the figure's activity within. Additionally, the rock is carefully illustrated, showing the shadow and texture. On the other hand, the shed looks almost like a two-dimensional, paper construction that is vulnerable and can be easily damaged by wind. This deliberate de-emphasize of the shed, which is the central component where the human activity happens, and the intentional immersion of the pavilion in its natural surroundings vividly convey a sense of remoteness and exclusion, capturing the essence of *zhuo.*

Zhuo **Through the Arrangement of Human Figures and Actions**

The arrangement of human figures in the painting further conveys Wen's intention to evoke sense of tranquility and exclusion, with scenes set either indoors or in the natural wilderness in an enclosed area.[38] In Leaf b, the figure is confined underneath the curved porch, which Wen portrays as an enclosed area bordered by the ground, two sides of the porch, and the bottom line of the chamber (Fig. 3). However, even when the figure had already crossed the bridge, where the only possible destination is the chamber, Wen opts to depict in a position that face the wall, enclosing him under the porch, embodying a choice of indirectness and a hidden, contemplative state.[39]

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[38] Li, "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," 23.
[39] Ibid. Although Li did not explicitly analyze the arrangement of human figures in lead d, the message of contemplation and distant from the outer world can be deciphered from his analysis of leaf h.

Leaf c introduces two groups of people (Fig. 6). The group positioned further from the entrance is depicted in a state of stillness, seated under a partially enclosed chamber with their arms gently folded, suggesting a moment of quiet contemplation. The chamber is half-walled, obscuring the figure's actions while revealing the quiet, sedentary posture, highlighting the figures' of humble and modest character. Looking at it from another perspective, the walls also act as physical barriers that restricts the figures' movement, and further isolating them within their surrounding.[40] Closer to the entrance, a figure stands in the wild but a pictorially enclosed area, surrounded by the path walk's fence, the chamber's half-wall, and the bamboo grove. This choice of composition reflects Wen's intent to evoke a sense of enclosure and exclusion, underscoring the painting's thematic focus on creating spaces that foster contemplation and ones that separate from the outside world.

In Leaf d, the portrayal of an extensive wilderness in front of the chamber contrasts with the presence of two figures situated within the chamber (Fig. 7). Wen, by emplying this juxtaposition, creates an intense contrast between two human figures' civility and the empty area's wilderness. Instead of going into the wilderness to interact with the natural surroundings, the figures are depicted leaning outward, yet remaining within the pavilion. This choice underscores a the theme of *zhuo* by reinforcing the figure's character of tranquility and highlights their engagement with nature from a place where it is safe and secluded.

While the other panels convey a sense of boundlessness through their incomplete portrayals of objects and settings, Leaf h appears as though it were a segment extracted directly from the garden and isolated from other sections of the painting. It illustrates an enclosed space devoid of explicit connections to the broader garden landscape. In this panel, all three figures sit on a square ground fenced by tall trees. Wen further emphasizes the theme

[40] Li, "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," 23-24.

of *zhuo* through the figures' seated, stationary posture within this secluded space by illustrating a deliberate seclusion from the external world into a serene environment, where contemplation is encouraged and one can cultivate their tranquil mind.[41]

As mentioned, the postures of the figures across the panels also indicate their lifestyle of *zhuo*. Among the eight panels, only the figures in Leaf f and g are depicted engaging in non-sedentary activities (Figs. 5 and 8) In Leaf f, a figure is set deep within a forest, almost camouflaged by the imposing trees around him.[42] By placing the human figure in the center yet blending him with his environment, Wen conveys the message that despite one independently in this world, he would be better off living a life of seclusion. The inclusion of two buckets beside the figure further illustrates a constrained mobility, reinforcing the theme of a seclusion and the necessity to restrain oneself.

Similarly, in Leaf g, the figure is located in an extensive yet almost isolated land, bordered by an endless expanse of water with no visible indication of transportation. The presence of a well near the figure might be interpreted as a metaphor for depth and tranquility of character, while his orientation towards a large tree trunk that stretches to the edge of the upper panel creates an illusion of enclosure within what might otherwise be perceived as an open space.[43] This intentional limitation of the figure's mobility and the depiction of enclosed natural area expresses the artist's message of *zhuo*, emphasizing the value of quietude, modesty, contemplate to engage with the natural world, and distant from the outside world.[44]

Zhuo Through the Arrangement of Stone Rockeries

Other than the architectures and human figures' geographical arrangements, Wen's intentional exclusion of stone rockeries further conveys the theme of *zhuo*. Stone rockery, the

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[41] Li, "Wen Zhengming Thirteen Scenes of Inept Administrator's Garden Analysis," 23.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 25.
[44] Ibid, 23.

piling up of stones or clays to imitate natural mountain, is a crucial element in Suzhou Literati garden design incorporated in almost all gardens, regardless of size and function.[45] Its aesthetically appealing forms and rich philosophical underpinning is favored by the Ming literati, often signals the owner's status, cultivated taste, and aspirational characteristics. However, in Wen Zhengming's depiction of the *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, there is a notable absence of stone rockeries across all panels.

A horizontal comparison with other Literati Garden paintings from the Ming Dynasty reveals that stone rockery installations were almost universally featured as a central design element. For instance, The *Painting of the True Appreciation Studio (*真赏斋图 *Zhen Shang Zhai Tu*) (Fig. 13). Also painted by Wen, this scroll depicts the scene of a small garden. Within this scene, two people are engaged in conversation in a grass-thatched cottage, accompanied by a servant boy. Around the cottage, ancient cypresses and tall wutong trees cast shade, while an assortment of rockeries and distinctive stones surround the chamber.[46] Despite its relative obscurity and smaller dimension, the emphasis on rockeries is clear.[47]

In contrast, Wen's depiction of the Inept Administrator's Garden exhibits a complete absence of such abundant stone rockery installations. The riverbanks, where stone rockeries are commonly built (as shown in *Zhen Shang Zhai Tu*) are replaced with flat clay buildups. Undoubtedly, clay is a material of much less "aspirational" compared to the Taihu lake rocks.[48] This choice of material and intentional exclusion of stone rockeries hence provides another aspect in deciphering how Wen's intent to underscore simplicity and a return to natural life over the display of wealth or scholarly attainments.

Zhuo **Through the Separation Between Panels**

[45] Ji, *The craft of gardens: The classic Chinese text on Garden Design*, 112.
[46] Ma, *Shanghai Museum Collection and Comments*, 329.
[47] Ibid.
[48] More on Taihu Lake and other kinds of stone rockeries, see Ji, *The craft of gardens: The classic Chinese text on Garden Design* and Xie, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens.*

By the aforementioned formal analysis, it becomes apparent that Wen Zhengming communicated the garden's abstract essence of *zhuo* by intentionally arranging and selecting objects and figures within his compositions. Moreover, the distinctive structure of the panels in these paintings further underscores Wen's deliberate intention. Unlike most Wu School garden landscape artists, who typically utilized long scrolls to present a panoramic view that unfolds the garden scene gradually from right to left, Wen chose a different approach, depicting the garden in segmented panels. Through this approach, Wen isolates individual elements and scenes within the garden, prompting viewers to focus on the detailed expressions of tranquility and seclusion in each segment while disallowing the viewers to grasp the scale of the garden, which further emphasize the theme of humbleness and *zhuo*.

A comparison with *Thatched Cottage by the Southern Stream painted by Wen Boren* (1502-1575), Wen Zhengming's nephew and the designer of the currently Five Peaks Garden, can clearly reveal the effect brought by the use of long scroll and segmented panels.[49] (Fig. 10). Wen Boren, who painted this landscape years before he started to design the Five Peaks Garden, employs the traditional continuous long scroll format, common among landscape painters of the time. Although such a composition tiles a perplexing garden construction onto a flat surface, it offers ample spatial context for each garden feature, enabling a comprehensive view of the landscape's layout.

Take the main section – the five rocks installation – as an example to illustrate that a similar illustration of an isolated island does not convey the message of seclusion like Leaf a and b (Fig. 2 and 3). The five rocks is located on the left of the main entrance, signified by the straw door stile located in the scroll's lower left section (Fig. 11). The five rocks stand next to each other, forming a half-circle arch on a hill in front of an elevated farmland. A boat drifts on the river that surrounds this half-isolated island, moving towards the left of the

[49] Liu, Path, Place, and Pace in Mid-Ming Suzhou Landscape Painting, 220.

scroll, and the water that it passed by goes upwards around the island, shuttle underneath the bridge, extends outside the scroll, and reenters the picture at the top, through a chip in the river fence (Fig 12). In this representation, Wen Boren created a space where sections of the garden are connected by doors, bridges, or river. The rocks are visible to observers both within and outside the painting, hence negates feeling of seclusion and distant from the outside world.

Unlike the feeling of disconnect and seclusion communicated through Wen Zhengming's segmented panels, Wen Boren’s continuous scroll presents the garden's features as open and accessible, emphasizing a connection rather than a separation. This contrast underscores the divergent artistic intentions and thematic focuses between the two approaches, which further emphasizes Wen Zhengming’s intention of designing the Inept Administrator’s garden with the spiritual essence of *zhuo*.

Chapter 2

Comparison Between the Painting and the Current Garden

While the painting effectively suggests Wen Zhenghming's intention of building a garden embodying the atmosphere of *zhuo*, asserting that the modern garden reflects this original intention is challenging. Over the years, the garden fell into disrepair with deteriorating structures, overgrown weeds, and decay. It became a place where "foxes and rats roam through the dwellings, and moss and lichen blanket the walkways."[50] The tumultuous era leading up to China's liberation in 1949 further ravaged the gardens. Many were repurposed as schools, playgrounds, hospitals, even stables.[51]

The renovation committee formed in 1951 faced a wracked garden with an ambition to revitalize the zenith of Chinese traditional Literati Garden design.[52] They separated the garden into three geographical sections and named them accordingly – East, Central and West. However, despite Xie's acknowledgment of Ming garden as the pinnacle of Chinese traditional Garden design, the reconstructed garden only exhibited minimal formal resemblance with the Ming Garden.[53] The East and Central sections, rebuilt on the same grounds as the original garden, retain faint echos of the Ming garden. The Western section was newly constructed and the most extravagant, composed of chambers, pavilions, and decorations that never existed in the Ming Garden.[54]

In order to fully experience the changes, one must walk through the modern garden. In summer 2023, I went to the Inept Administrator's Garden and endeavored to see the ways in which the current garden differs from Wen's intention. I tried to do so by deciphering the

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[50] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 156.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Xie Xiaosi, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 111.
[53] Ibid.
[54] For more information on the Inept Administrator's Garden's past owners and how each altered the garden's functionality, see Xiaosi, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 130.

poems that accompanied each panel, giving hints on the section's geographical position in the garden, which provide hints on the panel's geographical position in the garden.

The Plantain Railing in the Current Inept Administrators' Garden

The current Plantain Railing, although not sitting on the exact same plot of land as depicted in the painting, is located near the Rain Listening Belvedere, as also described in the poem (Fig. 14 and 15). Among the eight sections, the Plantain Railing's location in the garden, along with its architectural and spatial arrangement, most closely resembles that depicted in the painting (Fig. 16 and 17). Therefore, traversing this section offers the clearest and most compelling insights into whether the reconstruction committee's decisions have adhered to or diverged from Wen Zhengming's original design.

I enter the Plantain Railing by walking past the wall door on the upper right of the corridor that extends from the Rain Listening Belvedere's entrance. In searching for the scene in the painting, I failed to locate the rock in front of the plain shed as anticipated. Instead, at the end of the corridor, sits a pavilion (Fig. 14). This is a four-cornered pavilion, and is more decorated compared with its appearance in the painting, especially its roof and ceiling. The rooftop is built with only black tiles, and unlike the roof's straight edges as in the painting, this pavilion is slightly curved upwards at the end. Such a subtle change in the four edges' outline adds up to the pavilion's extravagance and washes away the scenery's flatness and plainness as communicated through the painting. This pavilion is only walled on the back, leaving a square hole in the center of the wall. Benches line both the left and right sides of the pavilion, connecting the poles that support the ceiling, while the front remains open. Entering the pavilion through this open front, a rock positioned between the garden's outer wall and the pavilion becomes visible within a square frame on the wall. This rock, nestled in its unique placement, reveals itself only when one steps into the pavilion.

Upon closer inspection, the rock exhibits differences from its portrayal in the painting. As highlighted in Chapter One, the rock serves as the central figure of the panel. The rock is depicted with shades and texture in a panel that depicts objects using thin lines, producing two-dimensional effects. Looking at the rock in real life reveals that such a choice of depiction is not arbitrary but realistic. The rock is about 170 centimeters high; the rugged outline is cut by five inward-etched round notches, three on the left side and two on the right, alternating sides. The larger upper part is supported by a comparatively slimmer base, covered with low shrubs and grasses. A moss trail extends upwards from the left side of the base, climbing up toward the first notch. There are no holes that penetrate the rock like in the painting, but there is a thin, vertical groove at the upper part of the rock. The rock is not painted or decorated, maintaining its natural gray hue. This, combined with the play of natural light, the accumulation of microorganism sediments, and the effects of natural weathering, lends the rock a spectrum of gray shades, highlighting its shape and texture.

In contrast to its representation in the painting, where the rock is situated in front of the pavilion, it positioned behind the pavilion in the real garden. One can only observe the rock by walking along a narrow path that runs between the inner side of the outer wall and the rear side of the pavilion wall. This placement of the rock, nearly reversed from its depiction in the artwork, significantly diminishes the few remaining ties between the rock's portrayal in the painting and its current state in the garden.

Comparing the Eight Panels with Today's Garden

A comprehensive comparison between the present-day garden and Wen Zhengming's paintings reveals nuanced distinctions. Of the eight depicted panels, only the Little Canglang, the Plantain Railing, and the Jade Spring have kept their names from Wen's time. Among

these, only the Little Canglang has preserved its original location. The accompanying poem for this panel reads:

> Once a small pavilion was built by the Canglang Pond;
> The green water still surrounds its empty railings.
> The wind and moon are always here to delight the fishermen,
> And boys, too, singing "Wash your cap strings!"
> Rivers and lakes fill the whole land, enough for my enjoyment;
> For a hundred years the fish and birds have forgotten themselves;
> Shunqin is dead, Du Ling far away—
> As paragons of hermits, who still rival them?.....[55]

Both the painting and the poem depict the Little Canglang as a serene and excluded venue surrounded by waterways, offering a tranquil retreat ideal for quiet reflection under the soft glow of moonlight. The present state of the Little Canglang diverges significantly from its depiction in Wen Zhengming's time; it no longer offers views of the moonlight or the enveloping sense of being surrounded by water (Fig.18). The once open railing is now obstructed by a white wall, and a black-tiled roof overshadows the bridge, which is flanked by walled chambers on both ends. Approaching the bridge from the left, the view to the right reveals water, but the left is blocked by a dark wooden door. Where the poem's "green water" might have been glimpsed through lattice windows, another white wall greets me instead. Rather than fish, flowers, and water, I find myself enclosed by artificially constructed walls and stained windows, fragmenting the view beyond. While this environment certainly isolates me from the external world, but how does this conviction of ineptitude relate to that expressed by Wen?

The same question arises when I entered the Hall of Distance Fragrance (远香堂 *Yuan Xiang Tang)*. The poem writes:

> Various kinds of flowers are planted next to the [Frangrant Grove],
> Purple luxuriance and red beauty in random array.

[55] Translation consults Roderick Whitfield's translation in I*n Pursuit of Antiquity: Chinese Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties* from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse. Exh. cat. Edited and performed minor changes.

> The spring radiance and brilliance embroiders them with a thousand artifices;
> In the fine air and scented mist a hundred fragrances mix.
> I love the smells that fill my bosom and sleeves;
> I do not let the wind and dew wet my clothes.
> My thoughts fly high beyond the flowery world.
> Quietly, I watch the bees dance up and down.
> The Bank of Many Fragrances is in front of the Rustic Hall. It is planted with a mixture of various kinds of peonies, begonias, wisteria, and other flowers. [56]

Following the poem's first two sentences, it is highly likely that the current Hall of Distance Fragrance is the Fragrant Grove painted by Wen. The Hall has four long windows through, all decorated with redwood lattice windows.[57] To the south of the hall, there are several magnolia trees, tall and elegantly straight, casting dense shadows over the street. Behind the magnolia trees, there is a small pond with an artificial hill (Fig.19). To the southeast, there's a peony altar, with the Jade Spring located to its left. The platform on the north side is wide, and the pond water is vast, looking across to a small island on the other side of the lake. Many pavilions are situated to the west, furnished inside with uniquely shaped Taihu rocks.[58] Similar to the painting and the poetic description, the current Hall of Distance Fragrance is surrounded by flowers and trees. Although the hall is not surrounded by water from all sides, the nearest architecture still sits across the river. Compared with other architectures in the garden, this hall is already greatly isolated.[59] Nevertheless, the current Hall of Distant Fragrance is surrounded on all sides by floors paved with "tiger skin" stones, and instead of seeing the flat roof like that in the painting, the current roof is constructed by layered black tiles and exhaustive patterned stone decorations.[60]

When reconstructing the sections where no authoritative guidelines were present, they had only their instinct to rely on. As the current director of the Stone Rockeries Renovation

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[56] Translation consults Roderick Whitfield's translation in *In Pursuit of Antiquity: Chinese Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties* from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse. Exh. cat. Edited and performed minor changes.
[57] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 156.
[58] Xie Xiaosi, *The Record of Suzhou Gardens*, 134-135.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

Department, Cheng Hongfu, said in the interview: "[The reconstruction committee] often faces on-site decisions that require a careful balance between historical fidelity and practical modern requirements."[61]

Looking at areas where the reconstruction committee "improvised" helps paint a more complete picture of the Inept Administrator's Garden's modern appearance. As mentioned, the garden is separated into three sections. The Western occupies a land of 8466 square meters, centered by a zigzag-shaped water pond.[62] Along the eastern wall, a wave-shaped water corridor is constructed over the water. It undulates and meanders, combining highs and lows in its design, and represents the epitome of galleries in Suzhou's gardens. To the south of the pond is the aforementioned Hall of Distant Fragrance. The Thirty-Six Mandarin Duck Hall is located north of the hall, and to its south is the Eighteen Mandala Flower Hall. Each corner is equipped with a warm pavilion with exquisite interior decorations.[63] The Central section is larger than the Western part, occupying 12333 square meters, where the Loquat Garden extends through the round gate, and the courtyard is elegantly and delicately arranged.[64] The Eastern Part occupied around 20666 square meters and is mainly composed of a large grassland and the popular stone rockery – Mount Splendid Cloud (缀云峰 *Chuo Yun Feng)*.[65] This stone rockery and the Shuxiang Room 秫香馆 (*Shu Xiang Guan*) are two of the most finely carved and decorated installations in the garden.[66]

Examining the current Inept Administrator's Garden wholistically unveils its grandeur in scale and extravagance in design. Notable aspects include the varied elevations of the corridors, halls, and pavilions that are both exquisitely and intricately crafted, along with masterfully created stone rockeries.[67] Observing these refined features within the garden of

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[61] Chen Hongfu, Interview by Fangting Gu on June. 17th 2023.
[62] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 167.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

Ineptitude offers ample proof that the differences between the reconstructed garden and Wen Zhengming's original design intentions are not isolated incidents but widespread effects that permeate the entire garden. Nevertheless, merely discovering such a difference between the garden at two times cannot fully assess whether the current Inept Administrator's Garden adequately represents Chinese Traditional Garden, as reasons behind such a disparity remain unresolved.

Recreating the Idea of *Zhuo* in Modern Times

After designating the Inept Administrator's Garden as a "Key National Cultural Relics Protection Units" in 1961, the renovation committee was reorganized into specialized teams focused on annual maintenance and restoration efforts. One of the departments, the Stone Rockeries Renovation Department, is tasked with the garden's rockeries and stones installation.[68] However, despite the numerous renovations taken, there lacks a comprehensive record left from the renovations, meaning that detailed information about specific restoration efforts on particular sections of the garden is almost impossible to obtain. Much of the decision-making regarding major reconstructions, including the placement of stones, often occurs on-site by the designers and managers.[69] Hence, analyzing how these decisions are made can shed light on whether the reconstruction committee aimed to adhere to the principles of *zhuo* intended by Wen.

Firstly, it is essential to know whether "creating a sense of Ineptitude" was the reconstruction committee's intention. An interview with Director Cheng revealed that the concept of *Shouzhuo,* or "holding on to simplicity or ineptitude," guided much of the committee's work.[70] He shared one of his personal anecdotes on stone rockery installation to

[68] Chen Hongfu, Interview by Fangting Gu on June. 17th 2023.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

suggest the 1950s renovation committee's possible on-site action to convey the sense of ineptitude:

> One time when we were renovating a stone rockery near Little Feihong, the designer excitedly ran to me and exhibited the newly constructed stone rockery by the water. It was elegantly designed, exhibiting all the highly demanding skills and was undoubtedly one of the stone rockery works of the highest standard. This would be perfect to exhibit the garden's extravagance and the art of the literati Garden. However, when I looked at it, it was precisely the elegance I was unsatisfied with. It is the garden of an "inept administrator." The rock should not be excessive and embellished. So I instructed them to trim off the rocks' edgy outlines and immerse the whole stone rockery into the lake by at least half of its current height.[71]

By immersing the stone rockery half into the water, Director Cheng believed he had preserved the garden's essence of *zhuo* while maintaining the garden's historical integrity. He asserts such a consideration as essentiall when conducting renovation acts, sometimes even outweigh considerations regarding the garden's level of excellence.[72]

Having established the renovation committee's intention in conforming to *zhuo* as the central pillar of reconstruction decisions, the difference of the current garden's appearance from that in Wen's painting can be explained as an alternative way of expression of ineptitude.

No matter how strictly one wishes to conform to past traditions, one is dealing with different materials and social aspirations.[73] When making renovation decisions, the renovation committee constantly faced situations where they had to carefully balance between historical fidelity and practical, modern requirements. Take the Mount Splendid Cloud 缀云峰 as an example. It was only in the Late Ming and early Qing Dynasty (around 1600s) has the craftsman discovered the rocks may be piled in a way that is "玲珑剔透 exquisite and crystal clear."[74] Prior to that, the fake mountains were mainly piled using clay,

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[71] Chen Hongfu, Interview by Fangting Gu on June. 17th 2023.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 170.
[74] It is an idiom in Chinese often used to describe objects that are delicately and intricately crafted, often with a sense of transparency or translucence that adds to their beauty. Conventionally used to describe jewelry.

dirt, and unpolished stones. However, the nature of the material makes a durable fake mountain almost impossible. One of the main objectives of modern renovation is to recreate the garden's old-time glory while ensuring its durability. Hence, unlike the paintings when the stone rockeries do not seem to be piled with stones, their appearance in the current Inept Administrator's Garden are all composed of hard rocks.[75] However, using this comparatively more extravagant and decorative material makes the feeling of ineptitude change as a form of expression from the Ming Dynasty.

It is now established that, although the renovation committee did not comply strictly with the garden's Ming Dynasty designs, they endeavored to maintain the "tradition" by the continuation of the idea of *zhuo*. Perplexing it is to see the current Inept Administrator's Garden endeavoring to convey the feeling of ineptitude through grouped architecture, exhaustive decorations, and advanced stone rockeries; this contrast brings out a contradictory effect, confusing the "tradition" endeavored by Wen with 21st-century's interpretations. As Chen Congzhou puts it: "The original garden interwove the stone and the clay, but now the rocks are explicitly installed, looking like a mouth of gold teeth."[76] This raises a critical question: How can a tradition be faithfully continued and represented when its essence lies in significantly altered appearance?

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[75] "Stone Rockeries" is a modern translation used by Alison Hardie and Ming Zhong in *The craft of gardens: The classic chinese text on Garden Design* to describe the fake mountain installations in Chinese Literati Garden design. This translation denotes the materiality of the installations, which can be inaccurate in the context of Ming Dynasty Literati Gardens. However, to keep the consistency, this translation will still be used to describe the Ming Dynasty fake mountain installations. For more information on the translation of Ji Cheng's *Craft of Gardens,* see Alison Hardie, and Ming Zhong. The craft of gardens: The classic chinese text on Garden Design.
[76] Ibid, 169.

Chapter 3
Spiritual Continuity Over Physical Resemblance

While groups advocating for distinct renovation methods view their methodologies as fundamentally incompatible, they unknowingly align on a deeper philosophical level.[77] From Chapter One and Two, it was established that those advocating for a faithful reconstruction based on Wen's paintings had criticized those who argue for a more adaptable approach tailored to modern aesthetics as defying Chinese tradition. Conversely, the latter group sees the criticisms as minor flaws that do not detract the garden from embodying tradition.[78] Despite the validity of both arguments, each supported by substantial evidence, each side primarily engages in formal comparisons, overlooking the fundamental basis of their disagreement. I will argue that the root of their validity yet divergent arguments stem from a unique Chinese perspective on tradition, one that relies on objects' spiritual continuity rather than physical resemblance.

Abstractness As the Paramount Standard

To understand the distinct nature of this argument, it's crucial to place it within the framework of Chinese historical context, which diverges significantly from perhaps more familiar Western practices. According to Wen C. Fong, Chinese paintings cannot be approached using Western methods since Western art has been focusing on the point of view of the viewer, the spectator, rather than the artist, ever since Aristotle categorized dramatic poetry as mimesis.[79] While Fong's view may simplify the complexity of art traditions, it highlights what art historians consider to be the essence of Chinese art. For the Chinese

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[77] Wu, *History of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Gardens,* 169.
[78] Ibid. Wu uses the idiom *xia bu yan yu* 瑕不掩瑜, translated as a flaw cannot obscure the jade's luster, meaning a minor flaw does not hide the virtues or true value of something.
[79] Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," 259.

during the Ming Dynasty, "the pictorial representation functioned as graphic designs (图载 *tuzai*), that express meaning." The picture's ability to signify practice of an image as a sign originates in the body and the mind of the image maker signifies the Chinese's perception of paintings as having a representational and presentational function.[80]

This critical distinction is central to the debate on the garden's authenticity and tradition. Contrary to preserving material artifacts, Chinese cultural practice values the transmission of tradition through language and ideas, allowing physical manifestations to deteriorate or be replaced. This reverence for ancestral memory emphasizes the immaterial over the tangible; thus, to make room for the new, the old must be allowed to fade, underscoring a unique approach to tradition.[81]

Painting within a tradition that favors the communication of immaterial ideas rather than concrete object depictions sets the abstract tone of Chinese painting. However, such an abstract focus is not a sign of inferior quality. On the contrary, it is the paramount standard one might give to an artwork.

According to Ching Hao, a painter from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-960), there are six pivotal elements in Chinese landscape painting, hierarchically arranged from the most to the least essential.[82] The first is vital breath (气 *qi*), the second is rhythm (韵 *yun*), the third is thought or reflection (思 *si*), the fourth is theme or motif (景 *jing*), the fifth is brush (笔 *bi*) and the sixth ink (墨 *mo*)."[83] The two foundational elements, brush and ink, directly relate to the painting's material aspects, encompassing the tools used by the artist. The middle two levels focus on the intellectual and conceptual facets of an artwork, where an artist formulates ideas based on contemplation and then visually expresses

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[80] Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," 259.
[81] Gutschow, "Architectural Heritage Conservation in South and East Asia and in Europe: Contemporary Practices," 3.
[82] Trouveroy, quoting from Qing Hao, *Art of the Brush.*
[83] Ibid.

a cohesive theme or motif on paper. At the pinnacle lies the abstract domain, where the physical presence of the artist recedes, leaving the spiritual message of the artwork.

This hierarchical framework, still influential during the Ming Dynasty, underscores a clear message: despite being painted with brush and ink, it is the *qi* — the painting's breath and atmosphere — that is considered the most vital element.[84] Ching Hao further claims that, if all six requirements are met, the painting would reach the highest category of art – *shen*, or spiritually powerful.[85] Similarly, Zhang Huaijin in his *Shu Duan* articulates a hierarchical view of art divided into three classes: the foundational level of talent (能 *neng*), followed by the intermediate level of wonder (*妙 miao*), and the rarest and most esteemed level of spiritual (神 *shen*).[86] This classification system reinforces the idea that, beyond technical skill and physical resemblance, the ultimate measure of a painting's value lies in its spiritual essence and capacity to evoke the painter's characteristics and aspirations.

Xieyi's Role in Illustrating Painting's Abstract Essence

Wu School Landscape painters, along with many artists in Chinese art, employ a distinct technique called 写意 *Xieyi* to convey the spirit of the space. *Xieyi* de-emphasizes detailed outlines for a freer expression and aims to capture the essence or idea rather than a literal depiction.[87] The term *Xieyi* is composed of *Xie* (to write) and *Yi* (the idea), suggesting that painting should be an act of expressing one's thoughts as if writing them down.[88] Similar to how literature is often approached – not by analyzing the words and stroke's formal appearance but by deciphering the words' meanings – *xieyi* emphasizes Wu School Landscape painting's underlying meaning, stressing its abstract nature. Wu School painters

[84] Trouveroy, quoting from Qing Hao, *Art of the Brush.* For more on painting's hierarchical categorization, read Munakata, Kiyohiko, and Yoko H. Munakata. "Ching Hao's 'Pi-Fa-Chi': A Note on the Art of Brush."
[85] Quoting from Trouvery, Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting, 11.
[86] Trouveroy, quoting from Zhang Huaijin, *Shu Duan.*
[87] Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting," 12.
[88] Ibid.

hence practice an approach to art that does not depict the objects realistically but instead communicates the objects' underlying message, essence, or, the *atm*osphere, energy, and breath (气 *qi*), as mentioned above.[89]

Wen Zhenging's *Inept Administrator's Garden* masterfully embeds this concept of *qi*, illustrating that ideas cannot be depicted through exact mimesis of the objects, but can only be expressed through abstract means. In other words, the pictorial arrangements served the purpose of embodying *qi* rather than realistic depictions of the real garden landscape. Munakata, in his essay "Concepts of Lei and Kan-lei in Early Chinese Theory," asserts that an artist captures not just the external appearance but also the inner *qi* of the subject through a "sympathetic response."[90] It means that the artist is open to and in harmony with the subject, seeking its natural essence, imbuing it with their own emotions, and painting the objects accordingly. While the objects' appearance in the paintings contributes to the depiction, the depicted are void of substantial meaning and do not embed the painters' personalities. It is the objects' natural essence that truly conveys meaning and communicates the painter's intentions. Trouvery further emphasizes that the artists' personalities, thoughts, and spirituality outweigh their technical skills, without which it is impossible to judge a painting. Hence, through the formal analysis in Chapter One, what is actually being revealed is that Wen, by manipulating formal arrangements of objects and human figures as a medium, actually endeavors to convey Master Wang's character and the garden's spirituality, that of *zhuo*.[91]

Spiritual Continuation As the Chinese Tradition

[89] Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting," 10.
[90] Munakata, "Concepts of Lei and Kan-lei in Early China Art Theory," 150-51.
[91] Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting,"14-15.

It is not established that conveying the abstract concept of qi represents the zenith of Chinese landscape painting and Wen Zhengming utilized *xieyi* to convey such ideas in *Garden of the Inept Administrators*. However, to assert that spirituality is a tradition extending from Wen's era through to the 1950s and performed by the reconstruction committee and is still performed by the reconstruction committee requires proving this spiritual representation is not merely Wen's individual approach but a consistent tradition practiced throughout Chinese cultural history.

This concept of an artwork's spiritual essence superseding material appearance and even authorship, persisting throughout Chinese cultural history, is epitomized in one of the most well-known pieces of Chinese artworks – Wang Xizhi (307-365)'s *The Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* (兰亭序 *Lan Ting Xu*). This masterpiece underscores a longstanding emphasis on an artwork's spirituality dating back to the 4th century. It reveals a cultural habit that values an art piece's spirituality over the author's prominence, demonstrating that the value of artwork in Chinese tradition lies in its conveyance of spiritual messages rather than its physical depictions or the fame of its author.

Wang was China's greatest calligraphy artist of all time, and his work "The Preface of the Orchid Pavilion" is considered the most skilled work of calligraphy in Chinese history until now.[92] Such a reputation has extended beyond Wang's lifetime, and attracted countless literati, artists, and emperor Tang Taizong (598-649). Emperor Tang Taizong, known for his zealous collection of excellent calligraphy works, ordered stone engravings of Wang's work to preserve it. However, the art piece and the stone

[92] Pierre Ryckmans, "The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past." To introduce the background story of the Preface of the Orchid Pavilion: In 353, on the occasion of a spring ritual, a group of scholars went on an excursion to a beautiful spot called the Orchid Pavilion. It was a merry and refined gathering, dedicated to the enjoyment of friendship, poetry and wine. At the end of the day, all the poems that had been improvised by the participants were collected, and Wang Xizhi wrote a preface to the collection. The preface itself is a short prose-essay in 320 words. On that day, Wang Xizhi was particularly inspired, and when he calligraphed his "Preface," he really surpassed himself. Later on, he repeatedly tried to recapture the unique quality of his original creation, and literally made hundreds of attempts to reduplicate his own masterpiece, but never succeeded in equalling the miraculous beauty of the premier jet.

engravings were all gone after Emperor Tang's demise. Some suspected the emperor brought the work with him into the tomb, but no one had concrete evidence nor claimed to have seen the original piece.[93]

Nowadays, many museums and collectors possess alleged authentic prints of Wang Xizhi's *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion*. However, the authenticity of these pieces were largely doubted after Guo Moruo's subversive argument in the 1965, casting doubt on the works' originality. Guo proposes that the pieces currently exhibited all emerged from Tang and Song Dynasties' engravings, suggesting that the preservation of the current *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* were all initially made through tracing copies (by tracing the outlines of Wang Xizhi's brushstrokes precisely, first with the fine lines, then filling them with ink of rubbings made from stone or wood engravings).[94]

However, despite the disappearance of the initial work in 649 and the acknowledgment that existing pieces are copies, the art piece's stature as an unparalleled masterpiece remains unaffected. This paradox can be readily explained when considering the primacy of an artwork's spirituality over its authorship. According to Wen C. Fong,

> "Wang's letters exemplify how traditional China operated as a culture of copies and replicas. Through *shenhui* or 'spiritual response,' the original act was re-created. This practice of copying helps to explain the remarkable continuity of Chinese art and culture… the life and authority of artistic tradition, through endless replication, can remain forever ancient and forever new."[95]

This perspective on calligraphy underscores the main reason for its endurance – its spiritual continuation over authenticity in physical forms, origin, and authorship. As discussed, artists often infuse their works with personal attributes and aspirations. In the case of *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion*, the environment in which Wang Xizhi created the

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[93] Pierre Ryckmans, "The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past."
[94] Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," 263.
[95] Ibid, 261.

work played a significant role in shaping his aspirations, which he then captured on paper. The soothing weather, warm breeze that flew across the Orchid Pavilion, the smell of the food, the dizziness after consuming alcohol, the sun, trees, the brush's shadow on the paper were all assimilated by Wang and were translated into the characters. Hence, the calligraphy and the characters themselves, no matter how refined and skillful, no longer remained as the central focus. For those who regard the copies as refined as the original, the validity of the copies depends on whether they can evoke the original's spirit. In other words, achieving *shensi* – the 'spiritual likeness' to the early masters – allows the later artists to maintain the original master's spirit. This example illustrates a distinctive focus in Chinese cultural tradition, where the object's material and physical authenticity are secondary to the work's enduring spirituality.

Examining Wen Zhengming's *Garden of the Inept Administrator* underscores the message that an artwork's spiritual essence surpasses its physical depiction's importance. Additionally, an analysis of Wang Xizhi's *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* reveals that this emphasis on spirituality over physical representation and even authorship has a long-standing history, with its influence extending to the present day. Reviewing these two examples collectively reveals that, while the specific content of spirituality may vary according to different contexts, the underlying principle remains consistent across time. This enduring focus highlights a fundamental aspect of Chinese cultural tradition, where an artwork's spirituality holds paramount significance.

Counterargument: Conveying Spirituality Through Physical Representation

It is now established that spiritual continuation is what has been valued in Chinese cultural tradition, hence concluding that the Ming Dynasty garden and the 21st century garden, although they appear differently, both inherits the same cultural tradition. From

previous chapters, it is demonstrated that *zhuo* is the spirituality Wen intended to conveyed, a practice later inherited by the 1950s reconstruction committee. However, some may argue that spirituality, while central, can only be manifested through physical presentations, without which the garden's spirituality of *zhuo* might not be perceptible by the Ming dynasty literati or the modern visitors. Thus, to firmly assert that the enduring element across varying forms is the garden's spiritual essence of *zhuo*, it's crucial to explore how even when selecting material forms that embody *zhuo* – such as decorated pavilions or partially submerged rocks – designers prioritized these elements' spiritual significance over physical materiality.

Wen Zhengming's deliberate exclusion of stone rockeries in his garden design and Cheng Hongfu's choice to submerge stone rockeries in water illustrate the crucial role rocks play in garden design. These decisions demonstrate how designers view the placement and treatment of rocks not merely in terms of their physical attributes but as a means to convey the garden's spiritual essence of *zhuo.* This section will use the implementation of rocks as an example to demonstrate how the designers' intention when choosing *zhuo*'s physical embodiment likewise focus on spiritual underpinnings rather than materiality formality.

Rocks as Physical Embodiments of Spirituality

Rocks has been an integral part of Literati's life due to its extensive cultural and philosophical context. "Playing the Rocks" has been a popular activity among the literati since the Spring and Autumn War Period (771-476 BC).[96] The earliest written record appeared in the *Book of the Later Han*: "Song thought the Yan (a place where the rock originated) rock as a precious treasure. 宋愚夫亦宝燕石."[97] In the Song Dynasty, poet Lu You clearly revealed his love of stone in one of his collections *A Self Narrative of a Leisurely*

[96] Ji, 园冶 *Yuan Ye, 300.*
[97] Ibid.

Life 闲居自述: “Flowers, as if they understand speech, are still troublesome; stones, though they cannot speak, are the most pleasing.” Such a favor of stones continued and peaked in the Ming Dynasty, when the implementation of rocks into poets, paintings and garden was prevalent among literati. One of the Ming dynasty painters, Li Rihua (1565-1635) once implied the importance of rocks to literati life:“All I want in my whole life is white rice to eat, fish for soup, good wine and fine tea to drink, and in my home ten thousand books and a thousand stone rubbings.[98] I want to not have to go out all year to see my vulgar person that somebody tries to introduce to me. After living like this for seventy or eighty years, I shall be a citizen of the Kingdom of Eternal Happiness.”[99] Among all the early pleasures that may aid one to reach eternal happiness, stone rubbings were a part of it.

This phenomenon was the result of mainly Daoism philosophy’s influence in literati through its appeals to one’s vision of nature, cosmology, and principles of ethics, and rocks serves as ab object with philosophical importance that allow the literatis to embody their aspirations on to, hence giving the name literati rock.[100] Signified by the name, Daosim philosophy is all about the “Dao,” or, the way.[101] Similar to spirituality, the divine principle or the Dao is something invisible and intangible that contends a status or a way of existence that one is to follow. It captures both the “sayable and unsayable, visible and invisible.”[102] Dao De Jing separates the world into *tian (*heaven*)* and *di (*earth*)*. Humans, who live on the earth, ought to achieve the stage of “sage” by following the earth’s natural rules of harmony and keeping nature’s equilibrium. If they fail to do so and turn to mortal desires and lust, they would not become a sage, a state of being all should ask of.[103] In order to live like a sage, the

[98] Stone rubbings can mean both carved stones and pieces of rocks.
[99] The Asia Society Gallerties, *The Chinese Scholar’s Studio.*
[100] Helle, Daoism: China’s Native Religion, 72.
[101] Chai, *Daoist encounters with phenomenology,* 1.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid, 79.

literati hence endeavor to live in a way that is harmonious with nature and embed such aspirations in every possible way.[104]

The rocks in Suzhou Literati Gardens resembles this harmonious and natural essence both from the way they are formed and their embodiment of Daoist Philosophy. The literati rock often come from the nearby lake – Taihu lake.[105] Other than their texture, the rocks are often chosen for the intricacy and apparent naturalness of their overall shapes and the holes that pierce their forms. As described in the *Craft of Gardens*, the earliest and until now most popular manual for Chinese garden designs, the best rocks selected are naturally firm and glossy, and contain in them shapes and holes formed by the attacks of wind and waves, which in often cases occur at Taihu lake's lake bed.[106] The rocks "cannot speak," they are solid and static objects without their own opinions, so they do not exhibit much characteristic on their own but embed whatever is given and reflect any action enacted on them.

Additionally, the place where the rocks are found – lakes – are also of tantamount spiritual importance. According to Dao De Jing, "The highest form of goodness is like water. Water knows how to benefit all things without striving with them. It stays in places loathed by all men. Therefore, it comes near the Dao, and water as the softest substance on earth "overrides the hardest of all things."[107] It can be inferred that the rocks' texture, curving surfaces, and holes are all products of the most praised substance of nature, and products of nature only. By installing rocks in gardens, the Literati embedded their spiritual aspiration towards nature onto the rocks; staying in harmony with nature and being a person that looks humble but with inner strength are two spiritual aspirations that the rocks embed.

When spirituality that the rock embeds becomes the focus, the shape of the curves and the number of bullet holes that a rock has are no longer important. Although the rock was in

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[104] Liu, "Path, Place, and Pace in Mid-Ming Suzhou Landscape Painting", 216.
[105] Ji, *Craft of Gardens*, 112.
[106] Ji Cheng, *Craft of Gardens,* 112.
[107] Ibid, 17.

front of the pavilion in the Plantain railing but is now hiding behind the pavilion's back wall, the message that the space communicates stays the same.

Hence, although the rocks, like other objects in garden remains a physical medium through which the viewer may experience the spirit being transmitted, designers inclusion of it in gardens do not primarily land on their formal beauty or curvature, but the underpinning spirituality of a harmonious nature that it embodies.

From Wang Xizhi's calligraphy to rocks' efficient embodiment of nature in Daoist philosophy, it is clear that spiritual embodiment has been the focus over formal appearance in Chinese society for a long tim. Although it cannot be denied that the rocks' geographical placement and physical appearance (shapes / holes) are important, and through which means can the message of spirituality can be communicated, the choice of physical representations in garden also values the object's spirituality over material appearance. It is now firmly established that, although the two gardens were painted, designed, and constructed by different painters for different purposes, the tradition of emphasizing objects' spirituality over material existence persisted. This was the tradition that the painters wanted to embed into their works, the tradition pertained to the current garden reconstruction, the tradition the renovation committee also inherited.

Conclusion

The Inept Administrator's Garden, after enduring centuries of decline and numerous restoration efforts, has reemerged into public view. Different from its initial quiet appearance in the Ming Dynasty, the modern manifestation comes with titles as renowned as its name – "cultural heritage", "fine specimen" of Chinese tradition garden, the "finest remnants" of the wisdom and tradition of ancient Chinese intellectuals.[108] But despite such acclaim, the garden's authenticity has not been thoroughly examined, particularly given the garden's modern formal discrepancies from its original Ming Dynasty design. This hence raises an intriguing question: How can the garden be considered the finest representation of past cultural traditions when its current appearance diverges from the tradition it aims to represent?

This paradoxical situation is initially investigated by examining contemporary society's inconsistent perceptions of the tradition that the Inept Administrator's Garden embodies. The investigation then proceeds by comparing the difference in formal appearance between the garden in Wen's *Inept Administrator's Garden* and that in current Suzhou, which reveals Wen's intentions of expressing the abstract idea of ineptitude through painting and the reconstruction committee's similar endeavor, albeit reaching contrasting outcome. The current garden, while implicitly conveying the feeling of ineptitude, looks "extravagant" from the outside. This phenomenon is then explained through an in-depth analysis of Chinese art theories and Daoist philosophy, particularly focusing on how abstractness and *xieyi* sets the basis for Chinese Landscape paintings. Wang Xizhi's *Preface of the Orchid Pavilion* provides support for the argument that the practice of valuing spirituality over concrete forms has

[108] 1997 UNESCO World Heritage Convention. & Suzhou Municipal People's government advertisement.

persisted in Chinese society for a long time, hence is the "tradition" that the 1950s reconstruction committee is really inheriting from the Ming Garden.

These investigations underscore a fundamental principle in Chinese tradition: the value of spirituality over the physical form and literal accuracy, hence reinforcing the idea that tradition are inherited and carried forward not just through material forms but more importantly through the continuation of spirit. A potential counterargument was then considered that suggests the necessity of a material form to convey spiritual messages. While recognizing the merit of this viewpoint, the paper delves into the spiritual and philosophical significance of Literati Rocks, drawing upon Daoist principles of harmony with nature and the idea of *zhuo*. This analysis posits that even the physical representation of a space's spiritual essence inherently possesses a spiritual significance that surpasses its external form.

Stepping back to reflect on the origin of this topic, it becomes apparent that an inadequate understanding of the spiritual message that Wen intended to convey through his painting might lead to the discrepancy in later interpretations of tradition and subsequent garden design choices.[109] As supported by Gu: "The main reason *wen* (paintings) has escaped our efforts to grasp it fully is because the existing scholarship has mainly focused on its historical evolution, etymological roots, semantic nuances, and textual meanings in specific contexts and paid insufficient attention to its conceptual roots in Chinese metaphysics and aesthetics."[110] Indeed, Ming Dynasty Chinese artists aimed not for viewers to merely observe the literal shapes and angles on paper, but rather to enter into the artist's mind, experiencing the landscapes as envisioned in their thoughts and feelings, in a conceptual and spiritual space.[111] Only in this way can we fully appreciate the underlying culture embodied in the sheds and rocks and attentively hear what they have to say about their tradition.

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[109] Gu, "Patterns of Tao (Dao): The Birth of Chinese Writing and Aesthetics," 151.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting," 6.

Figures

Fig.1 Wayne Wang, Map of the Inept Administrator's Garden, from article "Favorite Place — Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou, China," Aug 20 2023.

Fig 2. Wen Zhengming, *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

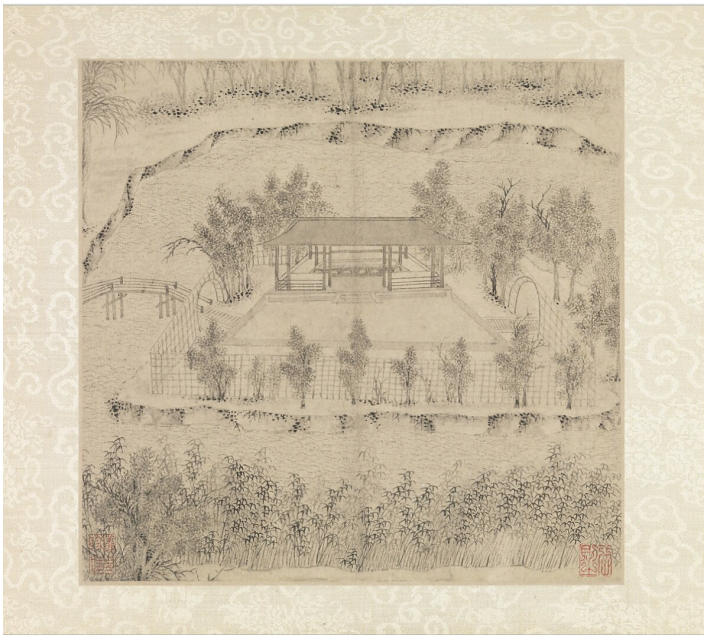

Fig 3. Wen Zhengming, Leaf a 繁香坞 - Fragrance Grove in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

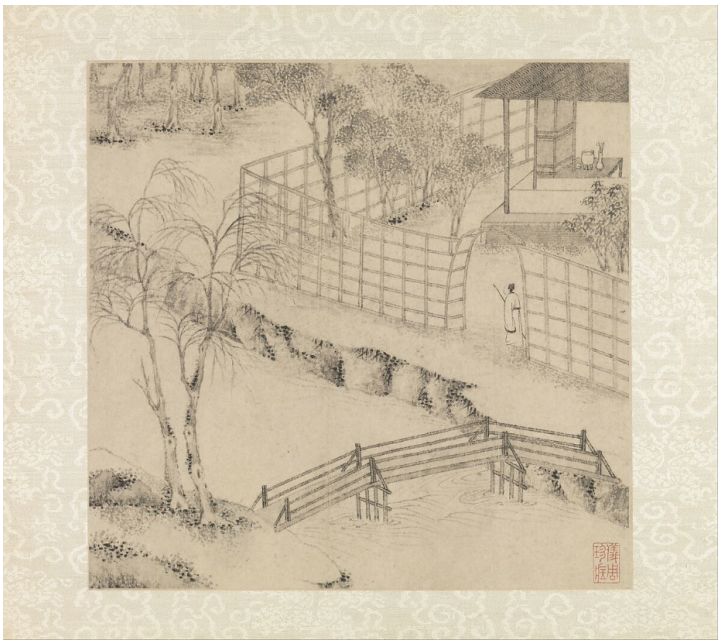

Fig 3. Wen Zhengming, Leaf b 小沧浪 - Little Canglang in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 4. Wen Zhengming, Leaf e 钓碧 - Fishing Port in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 5. Wen Zhengming, Leaf f 来禽囿 - Bird Haven in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

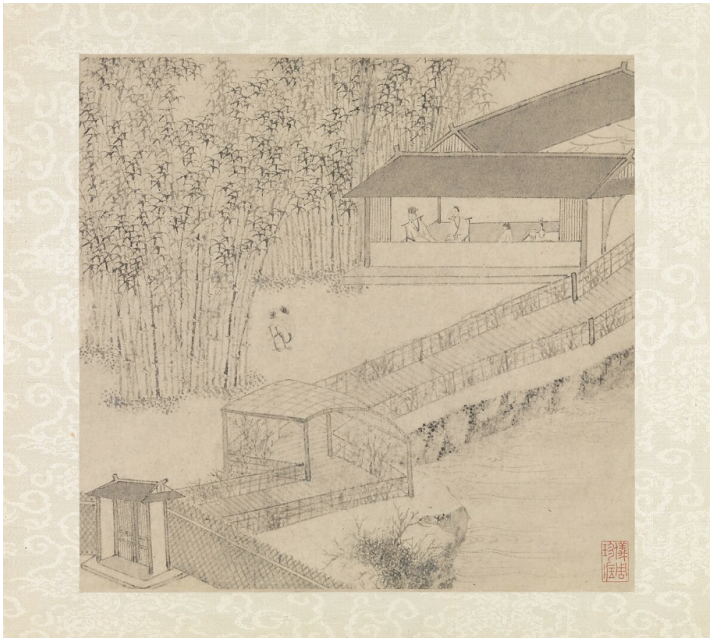

Fig 6. Wen Zhengming, Leaf c 湘筠坞 - Tranquil Bamboo Grove in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 7. Wen Zhengming, Leaf d 芭蕉檻 - Plantain Railing in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 8. Wen Zhengming, Leaf g 玉泉 - Jade Spring in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 9. Wen Zhengming, Leaf h - 槐幄 Locust Canopy in *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, ink on paper, 26.4 × 27.3 cm. Currently collected in The MET's Asian Art Collection, Accession Number: 1979.458.1a–ii.

Fig 10. Wen Boren, *Thatched Cottage by the Southern Stream*, 1540-50s, ink on paper. 34.8 x 713.5cm. Currently collected in China National Palace Museum Collection. Accession Nuber: 新00138270.

Fig 11. Wen Boren, Section of *Thatched Cottage by the Southern Stream*, 1540-50s, ink on paper. Currently collected in China National Palace Museum Collection. Accession Nuber: 新00138270.

Fig 12. Wen Boren, Section of *Thatched Cottage by the Southern Stream*, 1540-50s, ink on paper. Currently collected in China National Palace Museum Collection. Accession Nuber: 新00138270.

Fig. 13 Wen Zhengming, Zhen Shang Zhai Tu, 1549, ink on paper. 28.6 x 79 cm. Currently collected in National Museum of China.

Fig. 14 Photography by author, Plantain Railing in Inept Administrator's Garden, 2023

Fig. 15 Photography by author, Plantain Railing in Inept Administrator's Garden, 2023

Fig. 16 (Left) Photography by author, Plantain Railing in Inept Administrator's Garden, 2023

Fig. 17 (Right) Sketched by author, Sketch of Leaf d of *Garden of the Inept Administrator* Based on Current Plantain Railing, 2023

Fig.18 Dashu Yang, Little Canglang, Photography sourced from article “Inept Administrator’s Garden” published on Meipian, 2017.

FIg.19 Tu Xini, Hall of Distance Fragrance, Photography sourced from article “Suzhou’s Inept Administrator’s Garden” published on Meipian, 2019.

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