

# The Daoist Philosophical Practice in the Spatial Construction of Suzhou Gardens, China

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## Abstract

As the pinnacle of Chinese classical garden art, Suzhou gardens embody an aesthetic core deeply rooted in traditional Chinese philosophical systems. This study employs the Daoist concept of “wu” (non-being) as its theoretical lens, departing from conventional garden scholarship that emphasizes formal analysis and cultural symbolism. It posits that the essence of Suzhou gardens lies in a “spatial practice of emptiness.” Drawing on paradigmatic cases such as the Garden of the Master of the Nets, the Humble Administrator’s Garden, and the Linger Garden, the analysis demonstrates how architectural elements (including pavilions, corridors, and windows) employ framing and borrowing techniques to transform evanescent phenomena like skylight and cloud shadows into central motifs of spatial narrative, thereby establishing a visual regime of “capturing being through non-being.” Further examination of meandering structures, such as winding corridors and the Little Flying Rainbow bridge, reveals their non-utilitarian rhythmic cadence as an enactment of the Daoist dictum “the greatest utility resides in uselessness.”

## Keywords

Suzhou gardens, Daoist philosophy, spatial construction

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## 1. Introduction

Suzhou gardens originated in the Spring and Autumn period, developed through the Tang and Song dynasties, and reached their apogee in the Ming and Qing eras, becoming exemplars of Chinese private garden art. Their core design principle lies in the exquisite orchestration of rockeries, water features, flora, and architecture to condense natural charm within a bounded microcosm, giving rise to a distinctive spatial aesthetic encapsulated in the maxim “though wrought by human hands, it appears as if opened by heaven.”

Western engagement with Suzhou gardens began in the late seventeenth century. Jesuit missionaries introduced Chinese gardening to Europe, leading to publications such as William Chambers’ *Discourse on Oriental Gardening*, which inspired the construction of Anglo-Chinoiseries and jardins anglo-chinois in Britain and France. In recent decades, the deeper philosophical dimensions of Chinese classical gardens have attracted curatorial interest in Western museums, where they are interpreted as a transposable cultural paradigm. A prominent example is the Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, modeled after the “Dianchunyi” (Hall of Spring’s Arrival) pavilion in Suzhou’s Garden of the Master of the Nets. This installation aims to “recreate the ambiance of a Ming-dynasty literati studio” and to “provide an authentic contextual backdrop for Chinese paintings and artifacts,” thereby seeking to materialize, within a Western institutional framework, the poetic resonance, painterly evocation, and philosophical introspection embedded

in the spatial aesthetics of Chinese scholar-garden design(Murck and Fong, 1980). This cross-cultural architectural endeavor demonstrates that the “void” aesthetics of Suzhou gardens, along with the cosmological vision underpinning them, have come to be regarded as a core constituent of Chinese cultural ethos, with an influence that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Domestic scholarship on Suzhou gardens is remarkably abundant. In the realm of classical garden historiography, seminal works include *A History of Chinese Classical Gardens*, *A History of Ancient Chinese Gardens*, *A History of Suzhou Classical Gardens*, and *A Chronicle of Suzhou Gardens Through the Ages*. In cultural studies of Suzhou gardens, the Ming-dynasty treatise *Yuan Ye (The Craft of Gardens)* by Ji Cheng stands as a foundational exemplar, complemented by later contributions such as Tong Jun’s *Gardens of Jiangnan* and Chen Congzhou’s *On Gardens*, both of which offer profound explorations of garden art and its cultural dimensions. Moreover, a substantial body of scholarly articles specifically examines the distinctive characteristics of Suzhou garden design, forming a richly interwoven academic lineage. Nonetheless, the prevailing research focus remains anchored in historical textual criticism, analysis of horticultural techniques, interpretation of ornamental motifs, and decoding of cultural symbolism. These efforts have laid a solid foundation for unearthing the historical significance and cultural texture of the gardens; however, most studies remain confined to surface-level descriptions of material form or cultural representation, without systematically investigating the deeper philosophical mechanisms of spatial generation—particularly the materialization of Daoist thought, with “wu” (non-being) as its core proposition.

Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that bridges philosophy and aesthetics, this study adopts the Daoist concept of “wu” as its theoretical framework. Through analysis of the interplay between solidity and void in compositional strategies and visual mechanisms, it systematically examines how Suzhou gardens translate philosophical abstraction into spatial experience via the orchestration of spatial elements, thereby illuminating the profound cultural logic embedded in traditional Chinese garden-making.

## **2. A Universe in a Flask: Historical Origins and Spatial Construction of Suzhou Gardens**

The artistic accomplishments of Suzhou gardens are deeply rooted in a rich historical substrate and cultural sedimentation. From the primordial royal parks of the King of Wu in the Spring and Autumn period, through the emergence of an expressive, literati-informed style under the influence of Tang and Song painting, to their apogee amid the cultural and economic prosperity of the Jiangnan region during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the evolutionary trajectory of Suzhou, often hailed as an “urban mountain-forest”, constitutes a visual chronicle of Chinese scholar-official ethos inscribed upon white walls and black tiles.

At the level of horticultural art, Suzhou gardens have forged a distinctive spatial lexicon imbued with Eastern wisdom. Each architectural element possesses its own expressive aura: pavilions and belvederes serve as focal accents within the garden, functioning simultaneously as viewing stations and visual climaxes; their ethereal forms afford visitors ideal vantage points for contemplative repose. Winding corridors delineate the rhythmic skeleton of the garden through sinuous linearity, their artful convolutions generating the celebrated experience of “changing vistas with every step.” Leaked windows and moon-gate apertures, in turn, display consummate ingenuity, framing natural scenery into a series of fluid, three-dimensional tableaux and attaining the aesthetic ideal of “a window of one chi, a painting without intent.” The perforations in artificial mountains not only alleviate the massiveness of the rockery but also engender dynamic interplay of light and shadow as illumination circulates. Bridges spanning water—whether covered walk or arched—simultaneously partition space and, through the interplay of reflection and solid form, amplify perceptual depth in a dialectic of void and substance.

A close examination of the garden-making art of Suzhou gardens reveals it to be a horticultural enactment of the Daoist philosophical concept of wu (non-being). Laozi observes, “When clay is fashioned into a vessel, it is the emptiness within that enables its utility. When doors and windows are cut to form a room, it is the emptiness within that enables its utility. Thus, what exists provides advantage, while what does not exist provides function.(Laozi, 2021)” This insight lays bare that wu is not absolute vacuity but the ontological foundation upon which functionality is realized. Zhuangzi, in the “Human World” chapter of his eponymous work, advances the proposition of “the utility of uselessness(Fang, 2015)” thereby shattering utilitarian constraints and foregrounding a spiritual significance that transcends pragmatic value. This dialectically rich philosophy finds distinctive spatial articulation in the construction of Suzhou gardens. The gardens are not

merely material assemblages of tangible elements such as pavilions, terraces, towers, rockeries, water features, and flora. Rather, through intangible strategies of ethereality, negative space, and meandering convolution, they constitute a realm conducive to viewing, contemplation, and spiritual repose, thereby manifesting the cultural symbolism of Daoist wu within spatial composition.

### **3. Framing and Borrowing: “Wu” as Visual Core and Foundation of Artistic Conception**

Within the spatial construction system of Suzhou gardens, the functional value of architectural elements has long transcended mere physical enclosure. Their primary role lies in employing a refined set of “cropping” techniques and systematic “guiding” strategies to transform non-material, ethereal phenomena such as sky, distant mountains, and water reflections into the central objects of visual composition. In this way, wu evolves from an abstract philosophical concept into the concrete foundation of artistic conception. This spatial logic, which harnesses the void to govern the solid, sharply diverges from traditional analytical frameworks centered on material form and symbolic function. It thus opens a fresh theoretical perspective for uncovering the deeper philosophical core of garden art. As the Ming-dynasty theorist Ji Cheng asserted, garden design excels in “adaptation” and “borrowing,” and finds refinement in “appropriateness” of form and setting (Ji, 2009). At its essence, the ultimate aim of framing and borrowing is not to display the beauty of tangible forms but to activate the aesthetic potential of wu through the mediating role of the tangible, thereby achieving the spatial translation of spiritual experience.

#### **3.1 Pierced Windows ( Lou Chuang): The Poetic Encoding Mechanism of Ethereality**

Suzhou classical gardens feature pierced windows in a diverse array of forms, including square, horizontal rectangular, vertical rectangular, circular, hexagonal, octagonal, fan-shaped, begonia-shaped, and various other irregular configurations. The vistas glimpsed through these windows may aptly be described as “one window, one world.” In essence, the pierced window serves as a transformative medium for ethereality, its core function extending far beyond the exhaustive scope of semiotic interpretation. Conventional scholarship has often overemphasized the symbolic connotations of pierced window patterns, thereby neglecting their profound value as imaging devices for the “non-existent.” Accordingly, this study posits that pierced windows constitute a “poetic encoding system of ethereality,” encompassing the rules and mechanisms whereby material forms delimit, excise, and channel ethereality, rendering it a dynamic aesthetic text amenable to reading and perception.

The begonia-shaped pierced window at the “Begonia Spring Dock” in the Humble Administrator’s Garden exemplifies this “poetic encoding system of ethereality.” The geometric contours delineated by brick and tile provide a material foundation for the “existent,” yet they more crucially establish precise boundaries for the manifestation of the “non-existent.” The ethereal voids within the window openings, in turn, transmute dynamic natural phenomena—such as the swaying shadows of bamboo and the shifting interplay of skylight—into regulable visual texts through the projection of light and shadow. This technique of “revealing the non-existent through the existent” elevates ethereality from a mere physical attribute to a narrative aesthetic entity, resonating profoundly with Laozi’s philosophical reflection on artifacts: “We mold clay into a pot; it is the emptiness inside that makes the vessel useful” (Laozi, 2021).

To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the “ethereal encoding” logic in Chinese garden pierced windows (lou chuang), it is essential to situate this mechanism within a cross-cultural framework for comparative analysis. The encoding principles of pierced windows in Suzhou classical gardens diverge fundamentally from the static framing logic of the “Framed View” in Western gardens, with the primary distinction residing in their respective emphases on “ethereal fluidity.” The design intent of Western window frames centers on fixing the viewing angle of tangible landscapes, thereby effecting a precise capture of the “existent.” In contrast, Chinese garden pierced windows operate inversely, leveraging the dynamic properties of ethereality to position the “non-existent” as the aesthetic nucleus for the continuous generation of meaning: as time progresses and light conditions shift, the ethereal vistas presented through the pierced window undergo perpetual transformation, ultimately yielding the distinctive perceptual experience encapsulated in the idiom “one window, one universe; each step alters the scene.” This dynamic encounter not only manifests the Daoist philosophical tenet of “emergence of the existent from the non-existent,” but also corroborates the singular pursuit of “dynamic ethereality” within traditional Chinese aesthetics. The eminent architect Han Bao-de

asserts that “window openings and door openings fulfill a psychological need, serving to gratify the Chinese preference for ‘seclusion and profundity’ as well as ‘endless aftertaste’”(Chen, 2020), a proposition that further substantiates the profound value of pierced windows from the perspective of spiritual exigency.

### **3.2 Cave Doors (Dong Men): The Pathologization Configuration of Ethereal Space**

Cave doors represent a distinctive design element in Chinese gardens: framed yet devoid of panels, they embody elegance and restraint, opening onto unexpected realms. These doors assume myriad forms, encompassing circular, square, vertical rectangular, hexagonal, octagonal, begonia-shaped, ruyi-shaped, gourd-shaped, and vase-shaped variants, among others. The significance of cave doors within gardens transcends mere physical connectivity between spaces; their panel-less core morphology constitutes a spatial translation of philosophical import.

The vertical rectangular cave door at “Ancient Trees Interwoven” in the Linger Garden serves as an exemplary specimen for dissecting the mechanism of ethereal pathologization. The absence of door panels dissolves the obstructive quality inherent in conventional doors, facilitating a visual confluence of rock textures and vegetal forms between inner and outer courtyards, thereby achieving a spatial continuity characterized as “separation without severance.” From the vantage of perceptual psychology, the ethereal doorway further establishes an experiential mechanism of “anticipation—fulfillment”: prior to passage, the viewer glimpses partial vistas through the aperture, thereby kindling exploratory desire; during traversal, vision progressively coheres with each step, culminating in a narrative closure of spatial perception. This design resonates with Zhuangzi’s doctrine of spiritual cultivation: “In the empty chamber, brightness is born; good fortune comes to rest” (Fang, 2015), transmuting the conversion of physical space into an elevation of spiritual realm.

The quintessence of traditional Chinese spatial conception lies in “encompassing the infinite within the finite”(Fang, 2013). Cave doors in Suzhou gardens translate this philosophical tenet into tangible spatial language through the pathologization of ethereality. In the horizontal dimension, the ethereal void of the doorway engenders supple transitions between adjacent spaces, transcending the rigid constraints of physical boundaries. In the vertical dimension, the door’s silhouette forms a chiaroscuro contrast with the firmament, augmenting the sense of spatial depth and openness. In the temporal dimension, the shifting projections of light and shadow through the aperture infuse static space with dynamic rhythm. This “three-dimensional ethereality” design acumen not only accomplishes the organic integration of physical spaces but also erects a spiritual symbolic system of “a cosmos within a pot,” serving as the most vivid spatial annotation to the Daoist principle of “the mutual generation of the existent and the non-existent.”

### **3.3 Pavilions and Verandas (Ting Xuan): The Subjective Configuration Device for Contemplating the “Non-Existent”**

Atop a circular islet in the central pond of the Humble Administrator’s Garden stands the “Lotus Breeze on All Sides Pavilion,” a hexagonal pavilion with a pointed roof, fully open on all sides and devoid of windows. Flanked by water on three sides, it connects to a low hill in the northeast and links via winding bridges to the Jade-Clasping Veranda in the west and the Fragrant Isle in the south, yielding the visual effect of a “lustrous pearl at the heart of the pool.” The siting and formal design of the “Lotus Breeze on All Sides Pavilion” embed the core logic of “fashioning ethereal realms through tangible entities.” Its solitary stance amid the water constitutes a deliberate arrangement to enable the function of “contemplating the non-existent.” The pavilion’s transparent configuration, open to water on all sides, establishes a “visual framing apparatus.” Through the superimposed modalities of downward gaze and distant prospect, it transmutes elements of “emptiness” into perceptible carriers of artistic conception. In downward gaze, the cloud wisps reflected in the pond water undergo dynamic transformation with the rippling waves, shattering the static constraints of the physical structure. In distant prospect, the pavilion’s axial alignment precisely targets the North Temple Pagoda beyond the garden precincts, where the pagoda’s silhouette merges with the horizon, engendering an “ethereal resonance of remoteness.” It is this very design that elevates the pavilion from a mere space of repose into a mediatory conduit bridging the “existent” and the “non-existent.”

From the philosophical stratum of garden-making theory, this mechanism of “contemplating the non-existent” represents a profound integration of the “borrowed scenery” technique with the Daoist precept of “mutual generation of the existent and the non-existent.” The essence of borrowed scenery resides in

transcending physical confines to construct an “infinity” at the psychological level. Chinese garden designers, through borrowed scenery, foster an organic dialogue between garden space and the external natural realm, dissolving the perceptual incarceration imposed by enclosing walls and engendering the experiential cognition of “gardens within gardens, vistas beyond vistas.” Chen Congzhou further elucidates that the crux of borrowed scenery lies in “fashioning boundless artistic conception within finite space” (Chen, 2020). The “Lotus Breeze on All Sides Pavilion” appropriates the distant silhouette of the North Temple Pagoda precisely through the “distant borrowing” technique, extending physical boundaries to the urban skyline and inducing in visitors the spatial illusion of “dwelling within the garden yet seemingly amid vast wilderness,” thereby laying the psychological groundwork for the genesis of the “non-existent” artistic realm. Li Zehou, in discussing gardens, likewise observes that they do not merely replicate natural scenery but constitute “a pathway for humanity’s ‘return to nature,’ a material manifestation of the literati aspiration toward the ideal state of ‘human naturalization’” (Li, 2025). Pavilions and verandas, in this context, emerge as observational platforms and contemplative loci for realizing this objective of “naturalization.”

From the spiritual dimension of aesthetic experience, the “Lotus Breeze on All Sides Pavilion,” as a viewing apparatus for contemplating the “non-existent,” derives its paramount value from facilitating a spiritual transition from “roaming gaze” to “roaming mind.” Guo Xi, in *The Lofty Appeal of Forests and Streams*,

proposes that “landscape has that which may be traversed, that which may be viewed, that which may be wandered, and that which may be dwelt” (Guo, 2012). Among these, the category of “that which may be viewed” particularly underscores the guiding role of visual perception in spiritual experience, asserting that “viewing” entails not merely ocular survey but the circulation of thoughts and the peregrination of spirit. The design of the “Lotus Breeze on All Sides Pavilion” precisely enacts this principle: as visitors gaze downward upon cloud reflections and outward toward the pagoda vista, the movement of vision impels the flow of cognition, with the “impermanence” of cloud shadows in the pond contrasting the “permanence” of the distant pagoda, naturally eliciting philosophical reflection on the “mutual generation of the existent and the non-existent.” Zong Baihua similarly observed that the artistic conception of Chinese gardens resides not in the concrete objects themselves but in the spiritual transcendence they provoke, apprehending infinite cosmic vitality within finite landscape forms (Zong, 2015). Thus, pavilions and verandas, by framing scenes of “emptiness,” direct visitors from attention to tangible landscapes toward contemplation of the inner spiritual realm, ultimately attaining the state of “spiritual freedom.” This constitutes a vivid embodiment of the traditional Chinese garden’s philosophical aspiration to “convey the Dao through scenery.”

#### **4. Winding Corridors ( Qu lang ) and Flying Rainbow Bridges(Xiao Feihong): Temporal-Spatial Exegesis of the “Utility of the Useless”**

Chinese classical gardens excel in crafting meandering paths and bridged corridors that, at first glance, appear to incur spatial profligacy and diminished circulatory efficiency. Yet it is precisely this ostensibly impractical attribute that furnishes an annotation to the Daoist maxim of the “great utility of the useless.” Such spatial elements transcend the strictures of utilitarian logic, erecting a distinctive mechanism of temporal-spatial perception whereby the philosophical import of the “non-existent” finds full articulation in dynamic traversal.

##### **4.1 Winding Corridors: The Philosophy of Retardation and Rhythm**

The serpentine corridors of Suzhou gardens ensure that visitors encounter a fresh vista every dozen paces: a glimpse of lake rocks through a pierced window, or a tranquil contemplation of swimming fish from a railing. The corridor’s convolutions segment finite space into multiple depths of field, a value that far exceeds mere organizational function. The cardinal significance of winding corridors resides in their construction, through the “utility of the useless,” of a singular temporal-spatial sensibility. Take the corridor in the Master-of-Nets Garden, terminating at the quietly poised “Pavilion of the Arrival of Moon and Breeze.” By virtue of its sinuous design, the path deliberately retards forward momentum, compelling visitors to decelerate. Within the dynamic sequence of “circuitousness—discovery—contemplation,” they palpably undergo an extension and intensification of temporal-spatial cognition.

This deliberate quest for decelerated rhythm is rooted in the core design philosophy of Chinese gardens. “To fully appreciate the garden’s complex interrelations, contrasts, unexpected juxtapositions, surprises, and the varied prospects afforded by each station, one must... allow the garden to work its magic” (Murck and Fong, 1980). The meandering quality of winding corridors furnishes the material underpinning for this “aimless sauntering,” forcibly attenuating physical velocity with the ultimate aim of transmuting the visitor’s psychological temporality from utilitarian “transit” to aesthetic “immersion,” thereby effecting spiritual ease and emancipation. This perfectly elucidates the profound import of Zhuangzi’s “utility of the useless”: the corridor’s “uselessness” in expeditious passage precisely accomplishes the “great utility” of refining disposition and contemplating spirit.

The “useless” sinuosity of winding corridors dissolves goal-oriented utilitarian cognition, redirecting the locus of value toward the experiential process itself. This constitutes a practical manifestation of Zhuangzi’s concept of “roaming mind”: through paths of uselessness, spiritual transcendence and freedom are attained. Each bend in the corridor functions as a dual node of visual and psychological recalibration: amid perpetually shifting spatial perspectives, visitors shed the fetters of mundane temporality, progressively entering an aesthetic realm of “forgetting both self and world.” This transformative mechanism of temporal-spatial perception elevates the “useless” form of the corridor into a vital medium for spiritual cultivation.

Contemporary architect Wang Shu contends that the essence of garden-making resides in “evocative charm,” and that the nature of gardens lies in inducing deceleration, leisurely expenditure of time, and the discovery of meaning through purposeless wandering (Wang, 2012). This modern interpretation resonates across generations with the “philosophy of retardation” embedded in winding corridors, precisely illuminating the enduring value of the “utility of the useless.”

## **4.2 Little Flying Rainbow: Functional Transcendence and Symbolic Sublimation**

The “Little Flying Rainbow” in the Humble Administrator’s Garden, as an archetypal corridor-bridge, possesses a circulatory function that could be entirely supplanted by shoreline paths. Yet this superficial “uselessness” is precisely the key to apprehending its philosophical significance. The bridge’s authentic value manifests across three dimensions: spatially, it stratifies the aqueous expanse, augmenting the visual depth of the water; visually, it reflects skylight and cloud shadows, enriching the expressive modalities of ethereal scenery; experientially, it engenders a sensation of aerial suspension. When gazing downward upon piscine forms and cloud reflections, one directly apprehends the cosmic principle of “mutual generation of the actual and the virtual.” It is this transcendence of function that elevates the structure from a mere transit facility to a vehicle of spiritual experience, effecting a leap from material utility to philosophical cognition.

The name “Little Flying Rainbow” further intensifies its symbolic resonance. The “flying rainbow” image metaphorically positions the bridge as a spiritual conduit linking the mundane and the celestial, fusing physical construction with mythic imagination to erect a symbolic system of “unity of heaven and humanity.” This design acumen of the “utility of the useless” constitutes the spatial articulation of the Daoist vital posture encapsulated in “attaining utmost emptiness, maintaining profound stillness” (Laozi, 2021).

In synthesis, winding corridors and flying rainbow bridges, through their deliberate pursuit of “uselessness,” construct a comprehensive mechanism for temporal-spatial exegesis. They repudiate the monovalent standard of utilitarian spatial valuation, substituting the pluralistic orientation advocated by Daoist philosophy. Garden space thus becomes not merely a locus of material existence but a dojo for spiritual cultivation, profoundly manifesting the deep cultural attribute of traditional Chinese gardens to “embed philosophy within scenery.”

## **5. Water Surfaces and Apertures (Kong Dong): Ethereality as the Field of Vital Circulation**

### **5.1 The “Emptiness” and “Containment” of Water Surfaces**

Water is the soul of the garden. The aqueous expanse of the Humble Administrator’s Garden, with its posture of “embracing the boundless,” sustains the philosophical vehicle of traditional Chinese gardens for “containing all phenomena within emptiness.” The water domain, occupying more than three-fifths of the garden, is far from a fortuitous natural occurrence; it is a deliberate construction to enact the principle of “bearing the actual through emptiness, generating the existent from the non-existent.”

From the perspective of spatial perception mechanisms, the expansive water surface, through “mirror reflection,” integrates the firmament’s drifting clouds, the lakeside pavilions, and the aquatic lotuses and water caltrops into a single visual plane. The shimmering ripples formed by skylight projecting onto the water transmute the ethereality of “heaven” into tangible dynamic light and shadow. The distorted reflections of pavilions warp with the waves, fracturing the rigid boundaries of solid architecture. The growth and decay of aquatic plants such as lotuses further render the water surface a “living scroll” that chronicles natural temporal sequences. The core value of this design lies in elevating the water surface beyond a mere physical medium to become a mediatory nexus linking the triadic spaces of “heaven—water—humanity.” Thus, visitors standing on the shore or within a pavilion can directly perceive the stability of actual scenery while simultaneously apprehending the vitality of ethereal vistas, expanding the dimensions of spatial cognition amid the interweaving of the actual and the virtual. Tong Jun appraised the water surface of the Humble Administrator’s Garden as “though wrought by human hands, seemingly opened by heaven itself” (Ji, 2009), the essence of which resides in the water’s attribute of “containment within emptiness,” dissolving the demarcation between artificial construction and natural authenticity.

From the vantage of ecological perception, the “ethereal” quality of the Humble Administrator’s Garden water surface transforms it into a “perceptual theater” for bearing natural rhythms and vital circulation. The water exhibits acute sensitivity to environmental vicissitudes: in spring, as daylight lengthens, the duration and angle of sunlight reflected on the surface shift with the solar terms; following summer downpours, ripples and water droplets transmute precipitation into visible scenery; in autumn, the reflections of withered lotuses convey the philosophical tenet of “ceaseless generation” through the contrast of flourishing and decay; in winter, thin ice blankets the water, with subsurface currents and the skylight refracted on the ice surface yielding a visual experience of “motion contained within stillness.” Though the water surface does not directly manifest life forms, it becomes a “mediatory space” for sensing the flourishing and withering of all things through the flux and transformation of environmental elements.

“The wonder of the garden lies in the interplay of the actual and the virtual” (Tong, 2014). The water surface of the Humble Administrator’s Garden precisely achieves the function of “encompassing distant vistas and bearing vitality” through the form of “emptiness.” As aesthetician Zhu Liangzhi elucidates: “The ethereality in Chinese art is not utter void but a vital space of ‘spiritual circulation.’ A pool of clear water in a garden has ‘emptiness’ as its intrinsic quality and ‘stillness’ as its outward manifestation, yet it is within this emptiness and stillness that the wondrous existence of the world is reflected. Skylight and cloud shadows, verdant trees and azure mountains, even the sun, moon, and stars, are all mirrored therein, constituting a ‘spiritual altar’ of cosmic life” (Zhu, 2014). The water of the Humble Administrator’s Garden exemplifies this very “spiritual altar.”

## 5.2 Rockery Cavities: Respiration and Permeation

The crafting of artificial mountains in Chinese classical gardens is an artistic technique to enhance the garden’s spiritual aura. The arrangement of cavities in the “Cloud-Crowning Peak” of the Lingering Garden exemplifies the classical practice of the principle “employing emptiness for utility.” The numerous cavities of varying sizes perforating its surface are far from superficial mimicry of natural rock; they constitute a structural intervention to imbue inanimate stone with a sense of vitality.

From the perspective of spatial physical properties, the cavities establish a multilayered “system of permeability.” Vertical cavities permit light to penetrate the rock mass, producing an interplay of light and shadow that renders the ponderous stone “interwoven with brightness and obscurity.” Horizontal cavities create conduits for airflow, with wind whistling through the voids and rain reverberating within them, integrating auditory elements into the static vista. Minute cavities further provide habitats for insects, mosses, and other micro-organisms, transforming the rockery into an organic entity that “inhales light, exhales air, and nurtures life.” Ji Cheng asserts that “a mountain possesses cavities to manifest spiritual grace” (Ji, 2009), emphatically highlighting the activating function of cavities for the rockery’s “spiritual vitality.” The “Cloud-Crowning Peak” precisely embodies this theoretical precept.

Tracing its philosophical lineage, this design resonates implicitly with the Daoist tenet of “mutual generation of the existent and the non-existent.” The *Daodejing* states: “We chisel doors and windows to make a room; it is the emptiness where there is nothing that enables the room’s utility” (Laozi, 2021), explicitly

positing ethereality as the precondition for the functional value of the tangible. Applied to the “Cloud-Crowning Peak,” the “non-existence” of the cavities and the “existence” of the stone form a dialectical unity: absent the ethereality of the cavities, the stone would remain mere ponderous mass, incapable of transmitting light, ventilating air, or conducting sound. It is precisely the “non-existence” of the cavities that endows the stone with the vital breath of “respiration.” The subtlety of this design lies in its translation of abstract philosophy into concrete spatial form. Visitors directly experience the visual and auditory effects produced by the cavities while apprehending the cultural import of “mutual generation of the actual and the virtual.” The cavity design of the “Cloud-Crowning Peak” ultimately validates the profound cultural logic of ethereality as the field of vital circulation by establishing pathways for the flow of “qi,” rendering the rockery a respiring organic whole.

## 6. Conclusion

The garden-making practice of Suzhou classical gardens essentially exemplifies the translation of Daoist philosophy of the “non-existent” into spatial poetics. It establishes ethereality as the nucleus of visual cognition through techniques of framing and borrowing scenery, extends both temporal-spatial dimensions and psychological perception via “useless” constructs such as winding corridors and flying rainbow bridges, and sustains the dynamic circulation of vitality through elements like water surfaces and rockery cavities. Within this framework, ethereality is not the absence of existence but the ontological foundation for constructing aesthetic conception; uselessness is not the dissipation of resources but the critical pathway to spiritual freedom.

It follows that Suzhou gardens thereby transcend the constraints of physical space, becoming a medium through which observers apprehend the authentic essence of the Daoist “Way.” As visitors proceed along winding corridors, they forget the distance of the path; gazing through pierced windows, they behold the transmutation of cloud shadows; standing by the water’s edge, they witness the fusion of heaven and earth. This constitutes the concrete manifestation of Zhuangzi’s realm wherein “heaven and earth come into being alongside me, and the myriad things are one with me” (Fang, 2015).

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