Infinity in a Bottle Gourd: Understanding the Chinese Garden

Kongjian Yu with photos by Peter Del Tredici

As places where humans exercise control over space and nature, gardens can serve as eloquent expressions of cultural ideas. The author offers a model of a fairyland or utopia as a guide to the structure and meaning of Chinese gardens.

Once there was an immortal who lived in a bottle gourd and emerged each morning to sell medicine. Every night he returned to the bottle gourd to sleep. Curious about this strange behavior, a mortal followed him into the bottle gourd. There he found a spacious fairyland with landscapes of unearthly beauty. This story was told by Ge Hong, an important figure in the development of Taoism, in his fourth-century biographies of the immortals, *Sheng Xian Zhuan*, and thus for the Chinese "the world in the bottle gourd" became a synonym for paradise.

A similar bottle gourd space was described by the Tao Yuanming (365-427) in his prose poem Records on the Land of Peach Blossoms (*Tao Hua Yuan Ji*). He told how a fisherman lost his way as he travelled along an unfamiliar stream. Suddenly he is surprised by a pure stand of peach trees stretching along the length of the streambank. The peach forest ends at the source of the stream, at the foot of a cliff. The fisherman spies a small hole in the cliff. A beam of light shines from it, and he leaves his boat to explore the hole. Narrow and rugged at the start, the passage opens out into the light as he penetrates deeper into it. He comes upon a peaceful and flourishing landscape where young and old, all equally comely, play together. He learns that the people of the Land of Peach Blossoms are descendants of refugees from the warring dynasties. They have lived in this isolated world free from intrusion for hundreds of years. Over time the Land of Peach Blossoms (the Heaven of Peace) has become the most influential of Chinese models for utopian society and landscape.

The desire for longevity and peace, or perhaps the fear of death and unrest, are the essential motivations behind these stories, but what interests us here is the structure of their physical settings: An enclosing wall pierced by a narrow hole that leads to a generous space, that is, a bottle gourd model. It is this model that remains the ideal landscape in Chinese culture (Yu 1990a, 1990b). With the model in mind it becomes much easier to understand the "confusion" or "magic" of the Chinese garden that Keswick, Jencks, and other Western writers have remarked on.

The Chinese Garden as an Infinite Hierarchy of Bottle Gourds

Classical Chinese gardens were the monopoly of the elite, a class that has traditionally aspired to scholarly taste in their gardens (Tung 1978). It was Taoism that provided the strongest conceptual framework for garden

Figure 1. The Liu Yuan (Lingering Garden), Suzhou, west of Shanghai.

design: "The Tao (the Way, meaning the Order of Nature) inspired its followers to be profoundly conscious of the process of change in nature. Taoist humility in the face of nature is clearly expressed in the design of landscapes and in the adaptation of buildings to their site. Taoist philosophers, motivated by a desire to obtain peace of mind, were the main advocates of the observance of nature" (Johnston 1991). Thus the ideal landscapes described by Taoist scholars like Tao Yuanming and Ge Hong became the favorite theme of the garden. The bottle gourd model expresses these concepts in visible structure. One of the most famous Chinese gardens, the Liu Yuan (Lingering Garden) in Suzhou, can serve as an illustration of the structure of classical Chinese gardens.

Three distinctive types of gardens developed in China: the smaller private gardens of scholar-officials, the large and extravagant imperial gardens, and gardens associated with temples. The Liu Yuan, with a total area of two hectares, boasts one of the largest scholar gardens in Suzhou, a city famous for the number and beauty of its gardens. It was built between 1522 and 1566 (Liu 1978). A quick visit or a glance at the plan reveals the remote gate, narrow and twisted corridors leading to various enclosed spaces, and most important, the high, solid walls that enclose it. Like Ge Hong's fairyland or the utopian Land of Peach Blossoms, it stands apart from the secular urban landscape. "We can feel a pure atmosphere around our table and chair; the common dust of the world is far from our souls" (Ji 1988).

And yet, a bottle gourd of two hectares or less is too small and too monotonous, ways to

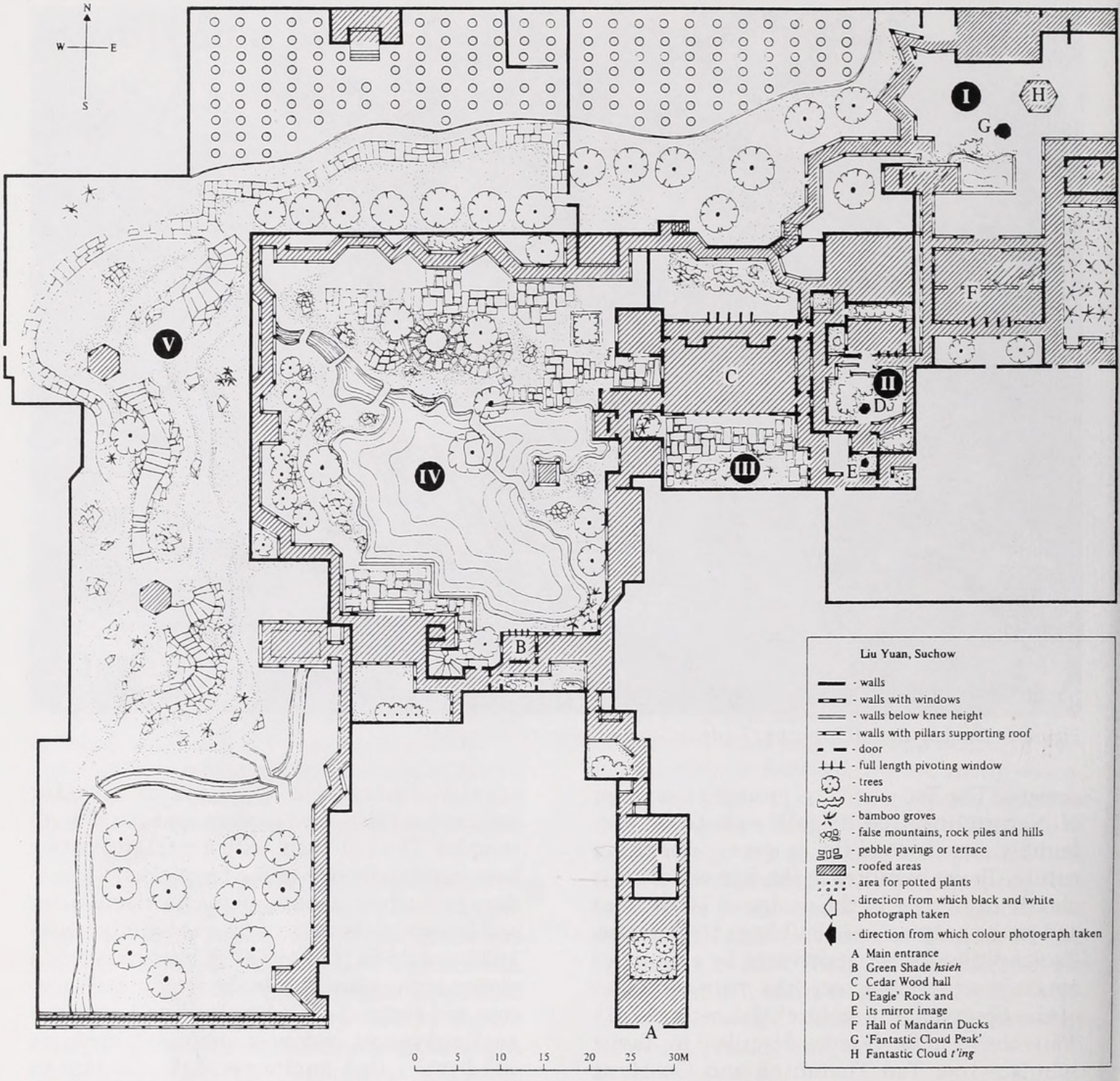

Figure 2. Plan of the Liu Yuan, Suzhou: A hierarchy of bottle gourds. Modified by permission from Keswick 1986.

enlarge and enrich the spaces must be found. One solution is to construct more bottle gourds within it, each with its own theme dominated by certain landscape features. For example, space I is dominated by intricately eroded limestone rocks (Figure 2). Staring at the slim rock (Figure 3), one can imagine a graceful lady, perhaps the owner's favorite daughter, combing her long and elegant hair by the pond, her image reflected in the water. In space II the Eagle Rock forms the main theme (Figure 4) while water dominates space IV.

Figure 3. Guan Yuan Peak (Fantastic Cloud Peak): A beautifully water-worn limestone rock comprises the main theme in one of several gardens within the Liu Yuan.

Figure 4. Detail of the Eagle Rock, located in space II. Like other rocks in the Liu Yuan and gardens throughout China, it is of limestone excavated from Lake Tai near Suzhou.

Figure 5. A corridor wall pierced with openings divides the space and yet allows adjacent scenes to leak through, enlarging and enriching the garden, and sometimes, as here, adding three or four layers to the visual experience.

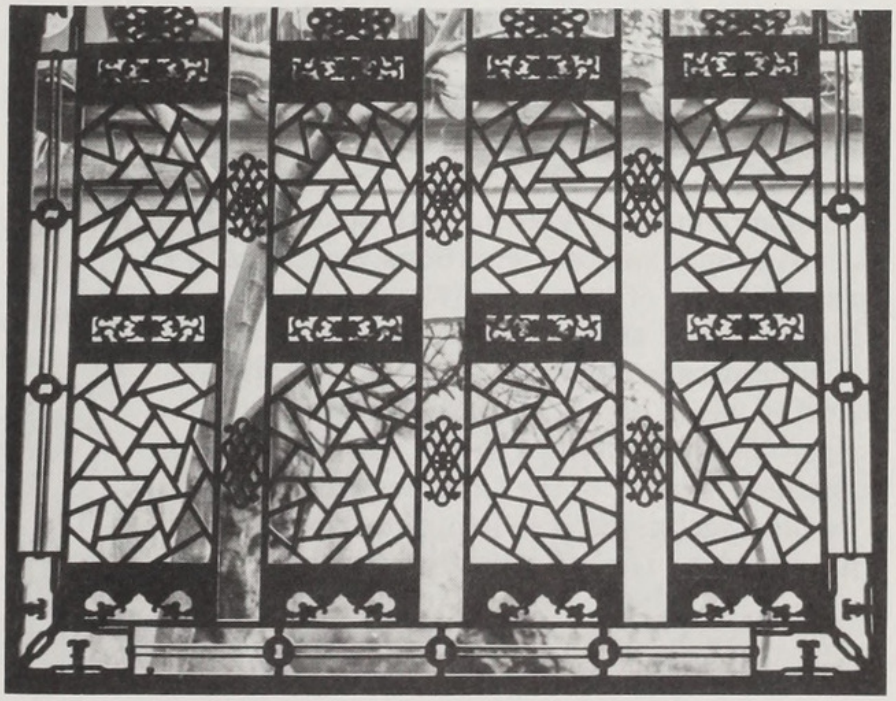

Figure 6. A window pierced in the cracked ice pattern, one of many symbolic patterns used in windows and paths.

Figure 7. Liriope spicata *lines a twisted path that makes the walk longer and the space seem larger.*

Another way to make a small garden feel larger is to borrow scenes from outside the garden. Walls that separate the spaces within the garden are not solid. Pierced with openings of various shapes and configurations, scenes can be stolen from other spaces (Figures 5 and 6). This technique creates a montage of very different landscape elements, creating a scroll of painting out of pieces from a variety of landscapes. This contributes to the powerful and confusing "magic" of the Chinese garden.

A third technique is to avoid straight lines. The simplest law of geometry is that the straight line between two points is the shortest. Thus, twisting the lines of corridors, paths, watercourses, and even the boundaries of buildings makes a space feel larger (Figure 7). And yet another way to enlarge and enrich a space is through reflections in a body of water or simply a piece of mirror (Figure 8). This is the same technique a shrewd storekeeper uses to display his goods.

Thus Chinese classical gardens depict the owners', or rather the scholars', ideal of an abode after the basic landscape model of the bottle gourd. While efforts were made to produce a small isolated refuge, techniques were also invented to make this bottle gourd refuge feel larger and richer. This is one principle for understanding the meaning as well as the structure of Chinese gardens.

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Figure 8. Water features mirror the scene and double the space.

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