

山水

SHANSHUI

The soul is like water – a visit
to the "Garden of the Pavilion of
Azure Waves" and other walks in
Suzhou

Wulf Noll

The soul is like water – a visit to the “Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves” and other walks in Suzhou

By: Wulf Noll

Suzhou, city of gardens, canals, and small lakes... On the second day of the New Year, two gentlemen set off early in the morning on a long-distance bus. The bus crossed the large bridge over Hangzhou Bay, which connects Ningbo with Shanghai, but then continued on to Suzhou instead of heading towards Shanghai. They made good progress on the highway, which was quiet that day, and reached Suzhou after two and a half hours. Two gentlemen, two philosophers, friends of China and its gardens; the German Robert Marian worked at Ningbo University, the other, a Japanese man, Masahiro Ueda, was dean at a university in Okayama. Robert and Masahiro had been quite close friends for many years and shared worked on many projects together. Robert had booked the prestigious Garden Hotel, now privately owned, which had previously been a government guest house and before that a villa belonging to Mr. Jiang Jieshi, who had it built for his second wife. Judging by the villa, this woman must have been very beautiful... For more than half a century, the villa was used as a state guest house, hosting special guests such as Mr. Carter, Dr. Kissinger, Ms. Thatcher, Mr. Kaifu... and the Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao...

Currently, private individuals from various countries and education-loving flâneurs are staying here; perhaps they are communing with the spirit of Madame... After checking in at the now considerably enlarged hotel grounds, Masahiro, who was more interested in the virtual world than the real one, shocked everyone with the question: "Are the birdsongs we hear authentic? Or are they artificially generated from loudspeakers?" Robert guessed they were real birds, but Masahiro remained

convinced that they were virtual birds. Simply listening to them did not clarify the matter. In any case, the birds chirped cheerfully at the Garden Hotel, and small fountains and water features sprang from the ponds.

Both flâneurs were interested in gardens from the Ming and Qing dynasties, for which Suzhou is still famous. The first garden they visited was located near their hotel. It was the “Garden of the Master of Nets.” The garden dates back to the 18th century. Its builder, a high-ranking official, was convinced of: cherished the elegance of life on the one hand and the tranquillity of the life of a fisherman who had cast his nets and was waiting for his catch on the other. The pavilions were grouped around the pond like nets. Anything could get caught in such “nets”: colourful birds, slender fish, beautiful women... One of the pavilions was called “Building of Gathering Elegance”, which contained classical paintings and fans with poems that suggested refined taste. It was as if one or more of the admired ladies might return from the afterlife at any moment to sing a sad and beautiful lament of lost love with a fan in their spiritualized hand.

But the aging official no longer thought about women, neither those in this world nor those in the next, but rather about what was ultimately more important: PEACE OF MIND. Apparently, the official had become a philosopher during his studies in the “Pavilion of Ten Thousand Books” and the “Pavilion of Osmanthus Blossoms.” The result of his reflections was recorded in calligraphic writing on a wooden tablet in a pavilion: “Tao is in harmony with emptiness/A state of emptiness is mentality.”



"The thoughtful civil servant," thought Dr. Marian, "had succeeded in combining TAO and ZEN into one concept and imagining the state of emptiness as a mentality. That was very philosophical."

Although Robert loved tranquillity, he was not yet ready for that. His thoughts suddenly wandered to his cheerful students, especially Lingling, whose name meant "Artful Leaf at Dawn." Robert Marian could no longer imagine his own mentality without these students... 'Beautiful Clouds' and 'Artful Leaf' would lend the pavilion a special charm, whether with their minds or their bodies. Instead of emptiness, Robert still preferred the fullness and sweet errors of life, which were superimposed on emptiness like the surface of a deep structure.

Around 150 gardens established Suzhou's reputation and gave the city a special

splendour. In the short time available, the gentlemen were only able to visit a few of the gardens. They walked to the gardens in the north, intending to visit the thousand-year-old *Shuang Ta* double pagoda on the way. Suzhou had these many gardens, but the city itself was by no means as outstandingly elegant or decorative as Hangzhou or Ningbo. Suzhou was a monotonous, large, and flat industrial city that would have looked rather dreary without the consolation of its gardens. The cityscape itself offered few sights worth seeing. Only the gardens and some of the canals were gems that gave the city its charm.

Finally, the gentlemen reached the twin pagodas dating back to the year 1000. This date raised great expectations. Robert Marian thought of the Japanese court lady



Shikibu Murasaki, who at that time had published the first major psychological novel, the “Genji Monogatari,” “The Tales of Prince Genji”. Everything that occurs twice in this world, such as twins, evokes expectations. The romantic philosopher Marian dreamed of young, self-confident, and playful twin sisters because of the charming right of confusion, but he could also dream of pagodas. Ancient double pagodas had an archaic charm. When the flâneurs reached their destination, however, they were met with a disappointing sight. The ruined pagodas rose up in a poorly maintained garden that seemed to have been forgotten by time. The towers, standing thirty meters apart, did not appear venerable, but fragile. They looked like dead pagodas. They could no longer be climbed because of the danger of collapse. It even seemed as if they could col-

lapse at any moment.

The old pagoda keeper himself looked fragile and had become similar to the towers. What pagoda pain! For a moment, Robert thought about calling the emergency doctor. The Japanese and the German man were the only visitors. Yes, only the two PHILOSOPHERS remained as LIVING PAGODAS, standing there next to each other, deep in thought. Each of these gentlemen was like a ‘pagoda’, a teaching building that had collapsed more or less elegantly several times, Masahiro Ueda with Heidegger and Robert Marian with Heidegger's successor Derrida. Philosophically speaking, this is called deconstruction, a philosophical method popular in the West.

Outwardly, however, the Japanese and German philosophers looked as if they had

been reinterpreted. They were dressed philosophically AND fashionably. That's not possible? Yes, it is. Masahiro strolled in a sublime dark suit by fashion designer and philosopher Yohji Yamamoto, while Robert Marian wore a long black flâneur coat from the house of designer and philosophizing dandy Karl Lagerfeld, reminiscent of Lord Byron. Tout va bien! It is worth noting that Mr Yamamoto and Mr Lagerfeld are admired more in France, Japan and China than in Germany.

Viewed with irony, as Heinrich Heine and Lu Xun like to do, one could call Mr. Ueda and Mr. Marian, who discussed garden art in Suzhou, “philosophical salon lions,” but actually “garden lions,” if this word formation has ever been used in relation to philosophers. Suffice it to say that the two ‘garden lions’ strolled through the famous ‘Lion Forest Garden’ (*Shizi Lin*), which con-

sisted of a large collection of porous boulders – formations made of pure limestone – that reminded philosophical colleagues of philosophizing lions. Such natural limestones, salvaged from various lakes, were very popular in China, although Robert Marian imagined how the lime trickled through the heads of many antiquated philosophers, or rather, lion heads.

The city museum was only a few steps away from the Lion Forest Garden, so the gentlemen headed there. They looked at traditional art objects, calligraphic works, and historical home furnishings. By the time the city lions left the museum, it had grown dark outside. In search of a good restaurant, or indeed any restaurant at all, the gentlemen walked along the multi-coloured illuminated city canal from the eastern part of the city to the western part without finding a single restaurant. When

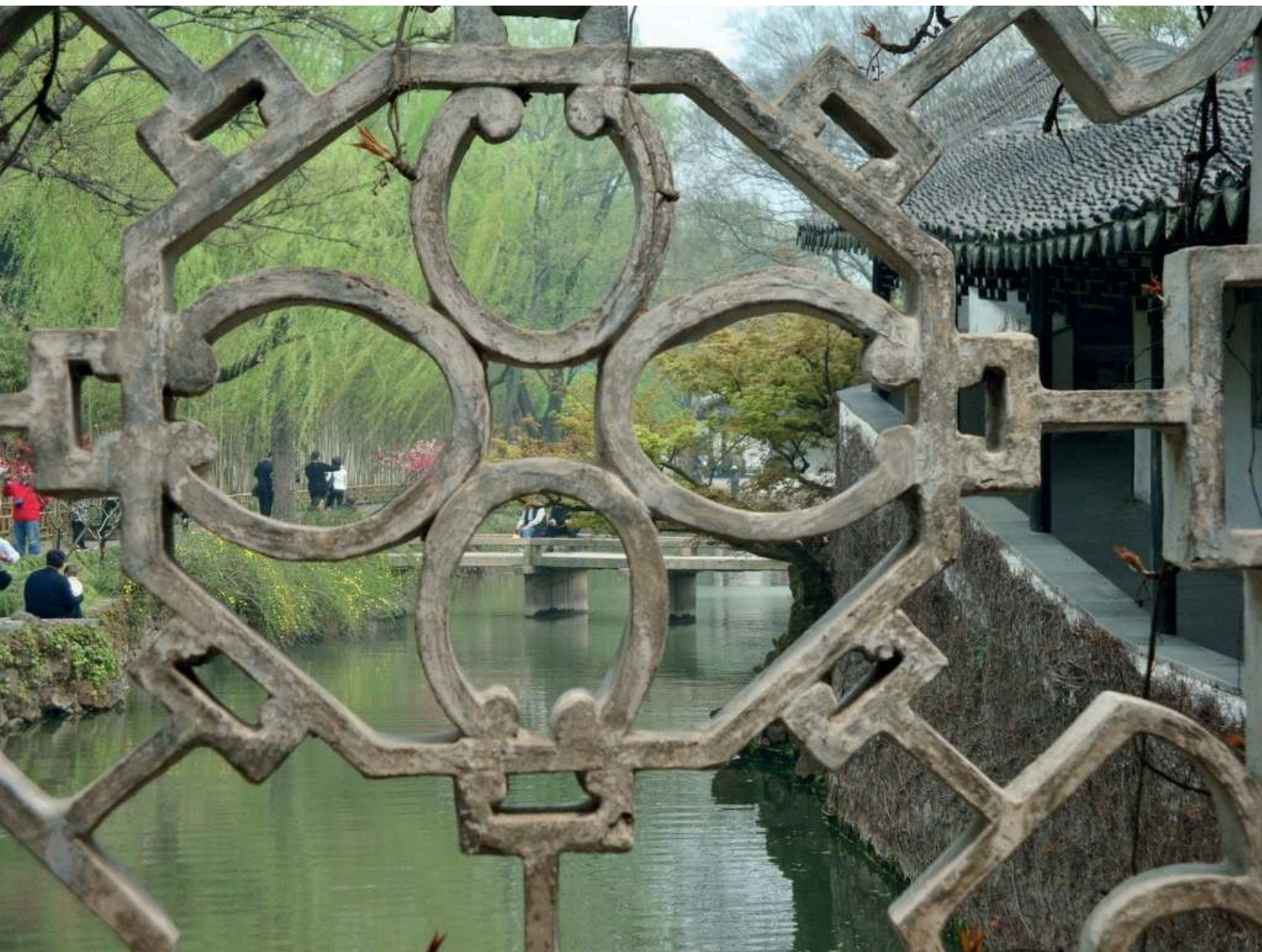


they had given up all hope, the strollers reached the bustling old town. Here they found all the restaurants they had been missing before. They were spoiled for choice and went to one of the restaurants that offered local cuisine and was well frequented. There, the gentlemen, in need of relaxation, enjoyed a leisurely dinner and thought about which gardens they wanted to visit the next day.

Slightly inspired by alcohol, the gentlemen enjoyed their nighttime stroll and, on their way back to the hotel, browsed in a few antique shops that were still open. Nothing unexpected happened; they didn't buy any antiques, not even carpets. Although new, unfamiliar cities are like labyrinths in which one can get lost, the philosophers did not get lost. That only happened on the hotel grounds, because

when the gentlemen entered the hotel grounds through the archway of the Garden Hotel, they did not notice that it was a different archway from the one they had passed through in daylight. Everything seemed to be as it had been in the morning, but nothing was where the philosophers expected it to be. The complex was as mysterious as it was alienating and full of riddles. A casual remark by a guest that the gentlemen were on the grounds of the Garden Hotel reassured them, but did not help.

In the entrance area of an illuminated hall, the gentlemen suddenly saw two graceful women in qipaos, as if made for aesthetically minded philosophers. As if in a trance, Masahiro and Robert walked towards the two beauties, who smiled graciously as they opened the doors and presumably





intended to lead them into the historic 'Lotus Pavilion' of Mr. Jiang Jieshi's villa for his second wife or concubine, although the gentlemen, tired, longed more for their quiet hotel room. Masahiro Ueda, whose mother was the daughter of a priest, simply considered the two apparitions in qipaos to be incarnated heavenly spirits. The heavenly spirits, that is, the women noticed that the gentlemen had lost their bearings on the grounds. One of the apparitions took pity on them. Masahiro later said that it must have been the goddess Guanyin herself who, after glancing at the room card, guided them through the garden to the entrance of the hotel wing they were looking for in the midnight New Year's cold, dressed in a light silk dress.

There, in the warm hall, the security of having arrived was reassuring, and another

surprise awaited them. The gentlemen stood in the foyer in front of an artificial pond, whose water splashed discreetly. On a small island in the middle of the tiny lake sat a young lady dressed in magnificent robes, playing mournful tunes on an old instrument, which prompted the gentlemen to greet the water nymph with a nod and find a comfortable seat in front of the island in the armchairs set up there. There they sat with a few other gentlemen, dreamily sipping their cocktails. They enjoyed their nightcap and gazed enraptured at the beautiful water nymph. The gentlemen followed their dreams. Masahiro thought of the witty symposium ladies who had listened to his lecture in Ningbo, Robert thought of 'Beautiful Clouds', 'Free Clouds', 'Men Surpass', of the 'Artful Leaf at Dawn', to which – to which – the dusk also suited. In the end, the doctors took



the beautiful water nymph and her instrument with them to their bedchamber as their dream...

It was still early in the morning, the birds were chirping. For Robert, they were natural birds, but Masahiro... The gentlemen listened to the chirping, then fell back asleep, even though they had planned to visit several gardens today, two of which were among the four most famous gardens in China: the “Garden of Linging” (*Liu Yuan*) and the “Garden of the Modest Official” (*Zhuosheng Yuan*). After visiting a wonderful but less famous garden, the two gentlemen entered the “Garden of Linging” after lunch, the first of the famous gardens. It dated back to the early 16th century. A long covered walkway led through the grounds, from which strollers could look out over hills, ponds, terraces, and pavilions. The walls of the walkway

featured calligraphy and stone carvings. This very garden was currently flooded with Japanese tour groups, which made it difficult to linger. The garden was overcrowded. Suddenly, Japanese could be heard spoken at every corner, because the Japanese love gardens and want to compare them – somewhat compulsively – with their own gardens.

And what about the “Garden of the Humble Administrator”? No, the administrator was neither simple-minded nor stupid. Nor was he humble. To come straight to the point: the garden was not humble either, as it was the largest and most elaborate of all the gardens in Suzhou. The generous official was named Wang Xianchen; he had the garden built between 1509 and 1513. He entrusted the planning and design of the garden to a skilled painter. Garden art in China means that nature, archi-

texture, and painting are combined in an aesthetic way. In modern terms, one could say that people have always intended to intervene in nature in a corrective manner with their gardens and to create something like a harmoniously coordinated 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (total work of art).

The garden consisted of three parts—the centre, the eastern section, and the western section. In all areas, there were charming ponds with water pavilions, but in the centre, the gentlemen saw a large lotus pond, on the banks of which stood the "Hall of Fragrance." Since it was early January, the beautiful lotus flowers were only visible in their withered form this time. Nevertheless, a delicate fragrance could be detected, but it came only from the perfume bottles of the elderly ladies. In the barren winter gardens, nature seemed to be pushed back, making the layout of the gardens all the more apparent. These gardens were reduced to the essentials, as the bonsai garden to the side always had been. Masahiro sank into contemplation there.

It was another garden that made the greatest impression on the gentlemen, the "Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves," a small, quiet garden filled with secrets. Robert was certain that this garden was his favourite. The "Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves" was located on a canal. Although the water was no longer azure blue but gray-brown, the reflections of sunlight still cast their magic on it. The sky was blue! Perhaps it was the sky that a small mountain with its pavilion stretched toward. The poetic garden seemed like a poem to both men; it had been created by a poet named Su Sunqin around 1044 during the Northern Song Dynasty. In contrast to the twin pagodas, which were in a state of disrepair, the garden had survived the passage of time particularly well. Masahiro and Robert read Su's verses on a plaque: "A

dark red lies on the woods, / At the same time, the sun's rays break through the elegant bamboo."

On the pavilion by the water, one could read: "We know that the soul is like water." Or, more succinctly: "The soul is like water."

What a powerful metaphor, enough to ponder for a year. "The soul is like water, the soul of a flâneur is like water," Robert Marian let the thought roll around on his tongue. He thought of the flow, the depth of the water, the rapid waves, and the change. He thought of the four Western and five Eastern elements.

Metal is the fifth element in China and it is associated with qualities or states such as maturity, contraction, detachment, sinking. But that didn't make Robert Marian a metaphysician; Masahiro wasn't one either. Sensualists at heart, the gentlemen admired some young Chinese women and couples in love because they were lovely to look at, floating on a pink cloud in the azure waves. And Robert Marian floated behind them on his 'beautiful cloud'.

That was in their imagination; in reality, the two worldly, materialistic but refined flâneurs strolled into a restaurant strengthened themselves with hot pot, which, however, required water in the form of broth—without soul. Robert had eaten hot pot many times before; it was "Beautiful Clouds" favourite dish. The dish was particularly good in Suzhou because it was based on the highly acclaimed red crabs from Tai Lake. After the gourmet flâneurs had cracked, slurped, and sucked the crabs, which was, in a sense, the first course, the broth was topped up with hot bouillon. As discerning gourmets, they put together the second course themselves with a selection of side dishes. Masahiro and Robert chose from what must have been a hundred possible variations:

fish cut into small portions, strips of beef, mushrooms, tofu, various vegetables, and glass noodles, which were cooked in the hot pot standing over a flame.

There was no denying that when you sat down with your partner or dear friends over a hot pot, then... then you had to agree with the other party that the hot pot and/or its broth also had a soul. What? Such a crude materialistic statement! Oh, come on! If you are trained to think and sublimate the characteristics of “crudely materialistic” a little, it becomes “subtle.” And ‘subtle’ soon becomes, as logically as it is compellingly, “fluid or ether,” in which the immortal poetic soul floats, whether in the broth or outside it.

In the late afternoon, after the gentlemen had returned to solid ground, tired from their visits to the gardens, Masahiro's infatuation with an old, human-powered rickshaw almost caused them to miss the last bus back to Ningbo. The philosopher's mistake was in assuming that everyone in a country as educated as China could read and write. The rickshaw driver they approached could not, but he did not let on. He was delighted to have the foreigners as passengers, who had handed him a brochure for the hotel. No problem, the rickshaw driver had sworn to take the gentlemen to their destination, but at some point he made it clear that he had driven far enough for his money and that the passengers should get out again. He had no idea where the hotel was or how to get there.

In rush hour traffic, no taxi stopped, so the gentlemen had to hurry to their hotel to pick up their luggage. They were able to get into a taxi in front of the posh hotel, but the question was whether the driver would arrive at the bus station on time. He tried to avoid the heavy traffic by taking a long detour around the city centre. But



luck was on Masahiro and Robert's side, and they arrived at the station five minutes before the last bus departed. Missing the bus would not have been a disaster, but Robert Marian's students would have had to wait in vain for their German teacher the next morning.



"Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting. That is the reason that when a gentleman sees a great river, he will always look upon it."

Mengzi



