Rugao and Water Garden in Seventeenth Century China

Yingzhi Zhao, The City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

The IAFOR International Conference on the City 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
My paper focuses on Rugao, a city on the northern bank of the Yangtze River, during the fall of the Ming dynasty and the consolidation of Qing rule in the mid and late seventeenth century. The unique status of Rugao was due to its location in one of the most prosperous and cultivated areas of China, as well as the area that suffered greatly in the war and violence during the dynastic transition. It also had the reputation of a literary city, thanks to a local writer Mao Xiao (1611-1693) and his estate, the Water Garden. Mao's estate became ruins after the conquest, but it was a heaven for Mao and his politically marginalized friends, as the old sites on the ruins symbolized their aesthetics and sensibility. One such site was the Tree-Nest, a pavilion, built on an old tree beside a river. The Tree-Nest showed Mao's attempt to emulate the ancients' simple life, but it was also in tune with the Ming literati's interest in strangeness and artfulness. Only when the pavilion collapsed and the tree alone was left after the conquest did the Tree-Nest recover its original significance and invite Mao and his friends to contemplate what it meant to live on a tree while no place was left for them in the world. By examining how the estate obtained new meanings, I will explore how the city survived the destruction, how destruction led to reconstruction, and how the literati culture of the Ming was commemorated.

Keywords: East China, seventeenth century, garden culture, ruins

Introduction

In seventeenth-century China, Rugao was a county of Yangzhou, one of the empire's most celebrated cities of wealth, culture, and refined taste. The special cultural and geographical status of Yangzhou made it vulnerable to the catastrophic dynastic transition in the mid and late seventeenth century, when China witnessed the Qing conquest of the Ming.

Mao Xiang (1611-1693) was a crucial figure in the history of Rugao. The Mao family was one of the most prestigious local families. Mao Xiang's grandfather and father were high officials of the Ming dynasty. Mao Xiang failed in the national examination, and never served in the Ming government, but his literary talent and broad social connections contributed to his important role in the literary and cultural history of seventeenth-century China.

Estates and gardens of famous literati, scholar-officials, and wealthy merchants constituted an important aspect of city life in late imperial China. The Mao family also owned such a garden, called the *Shuihui yuan* (The Water Garden), which comprised many sites.[1] These sites were the venues of literary gatherings organized by Mao and contributed to volumes of literary collections written by Mao and his friends. These literary gatherings and collections both advocated local culture, and contributed to establishing a literary network that crossed geographical barriers. The gatherings were held both before and after the fall of the Ming dynasty, and therefore the accompanying collections suggest aesthetic and cultural changes in tune with the dynastic transition. They provide us with a lens through which to perceive the impact of political circumstances on culture.

The Tree-Nest

One of the sites examined in this paper is called *Puchao*, the Tree-Nest.[2] In 1634, Mao returned to Rugao after his second failure in the national examination. He found a big, old tree beside the Floating Dragon River in the southern corner of Rugao. The bent trunk of the tree stretched over the river like a bridge, and its shade could shelter hundreds of men. Mao had the Tree-Nest, a pavilion, built on the tree, and had the pavilion connected to the bank by a bridge. His inspiration came from the Song poet Zhang Zi's (1153-1221?) invention of the Clouds-Riding Pavilion, which hung in midair, propped against four surrounding pines with iron chains, and accessible only via a staircase. However, unlike Zhang who had the pavilion built to satisfy his taste for luxury, Mao suggested that he, like a clumsy bird too tired to fly, wanted to rest in the Tree-Nest, and spare himself the pain and struggles in the examination.[3]

Many seventeenth-century Chinese literati showed interest in constructions similar to the Tree-Nest, because the design not only reflected their wish to withdraw from the noisy city and boring officialdom, but was also in accord with their fascination with *qi* (marvel, strangeness) and *huan* (illusion). In an essay, Zhang Dai (1597-1684) records a study space in his childhood, a pavilion that seemed to be dangling among the tree

[1] The literal meaning of *Shuihui yuan* is that streams converge in the garden.
[2] The Tree-Nest was outside the Water Garden, but like the sites in the garden, it was an indispensable part of Mao Xiang's estate.
[3] Mao Xiang, "Account of the Tree-Nest," in Mao Xiang, ed., *Tongren ji*, 3.25.

tops and was thus entitled the "Suspended in the Branches Pavilion." The title borrows a line from the eighth-century poet Du Shenyan (ca.645-708): "On the tips of trees dangles the jade hall."[4] This is Zhang Dai's description of the pavilion. "I remember the pavilion was situated at the foot of a sharp precipice, perched on pilings of wood and stone. No soil had been used at all. It was a flying space in a building without mass, with the eaves aligned like combs' teeth. The edge of the cliff rose over the roof, a mass of dense trees and foliage, all tangled in confusion with the eaves and the roof tiles."[5] Zhang loved the pavilion, because it had, in his own words, "strange charms." The painter Gong Xian (1618-1689) portrays this type of pavilions in several paintings. The pavilion in the following painting seems to be a visual counterpart of Zhang Dai's study space.

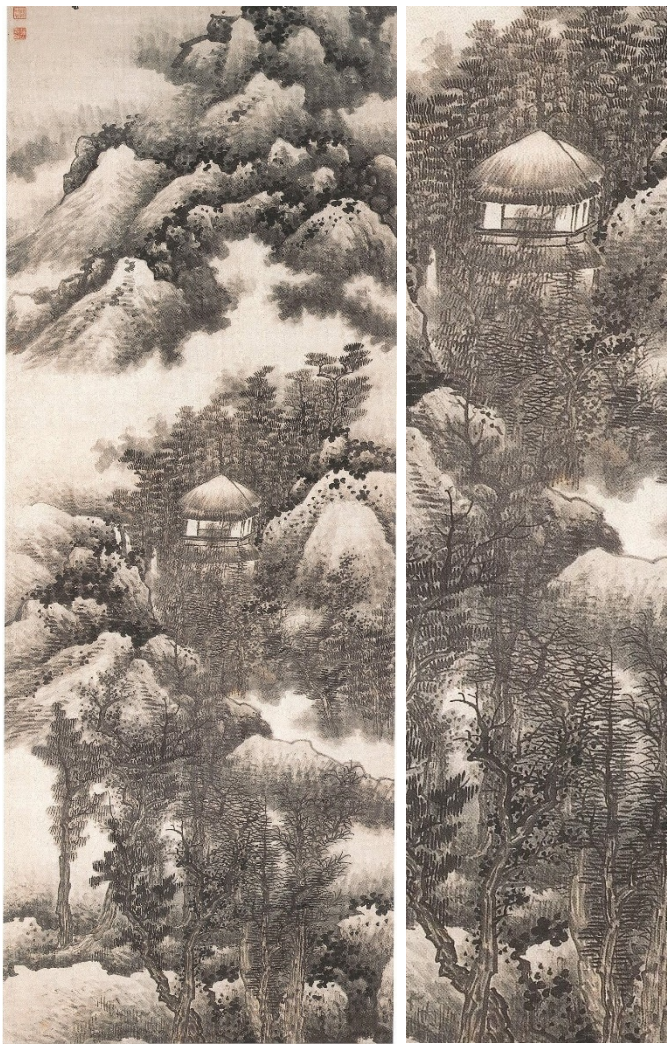

Figure 1: Gong Xian, *Marvelous Peaks amid Autumn Clouds*

The precarious pavilion in the next painting, propped against two steep cliffs, captures the seventeenth-century literati's fascination with strangeness and illusion. A pavilion like this may only exist in the artist's imagination.

[4] Zhang Dai, *Tao'an mengyi*, 199-200.
[5] English translation from Jonathan Spence, *Return to Dragon Mountain: Memories of a Late Ming Man*, 64.

Figure 2: Gong Xian, *Landscape*

The next painting of a pavilion among tree tops carries an inscription, which indicates that such a design helps one seek quiet and transcendence. The inscription reads: “The limpid pool of water, the sapphire sky steeping. / White gulls fly high, riving blue-gray mist. / The zither is stretched and books are displayed on thousands of trees. / In the whole day only stillness is atop the tower.”

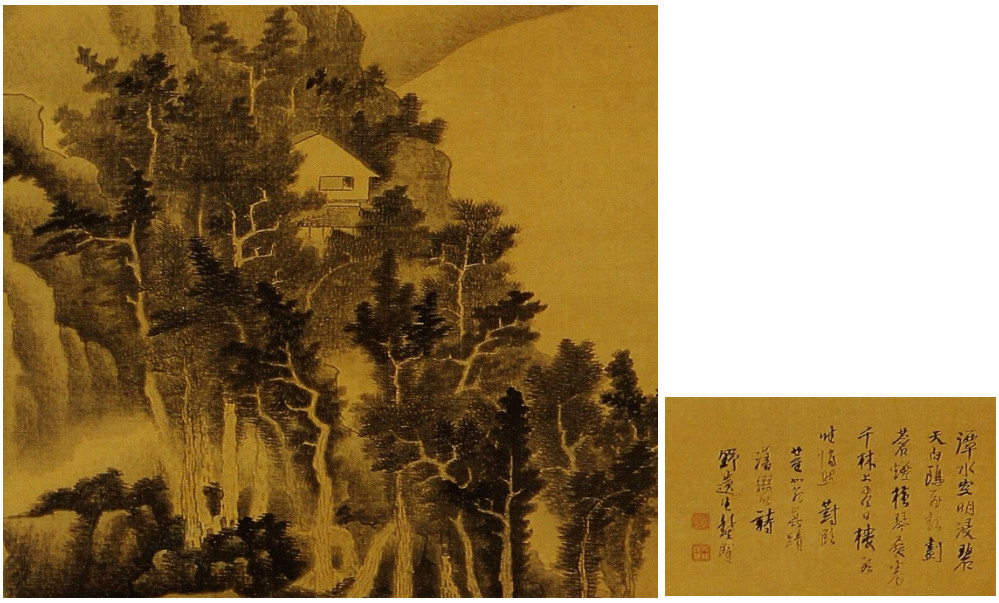

Figure 3: Gong Xian, *After Dong Yuan’s Landscape*

In late imperial Chinese gardens, a special design called *geshan* (Storied Tower Mountain) also bears some resemblance to the Tree-Nest. Storied Tower Mountain is a two-storied tower built on or next to an artificial mountain. No staircase is found inside the tower, and one can only approach the second story through the stairs on the artificial mountain. The design creates the illusory effects of one walking in the clouds to a heavenly building, because legend has it that when vapors touch rocks they turn into clouds and that clouds emerge from grottoes. The *Tiyun shi* (The Ascending to the Clouds Hall) in the *Wangshi yuan* (The Master of the Nets Garden) is such a two-storied tower. Its second story is only accessible through the stairway on the adjacent artificial mountain.

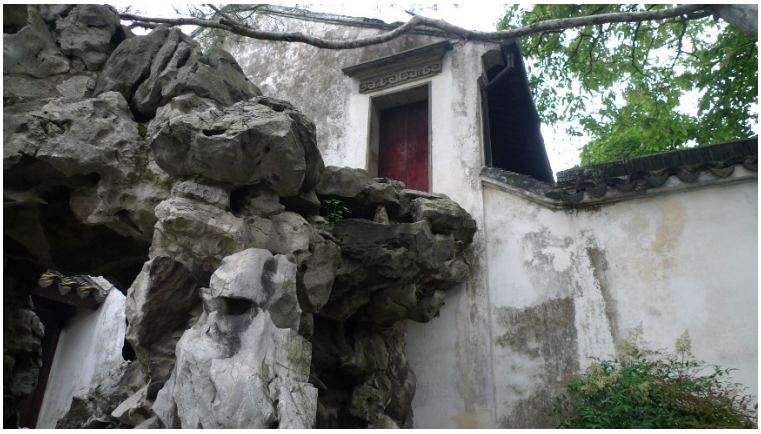

Figure 4: The Ascending to the Clouds Hall, The Master of the Nets Garden, Suzhou

Another example is the *Mingse lou* (The Bright Tower) in the *Liuyuan* (The Lingering Garden), built in 1593. The adjacent artificial mountain, on which the stairway leads inside to the upper story of the tower, is entitled the *Yiti yun* (A Ladder of Clouds).

Figure 5: The Bright Tower, The Lingering Garden, Suzhou

Figure 6: A Ladder of Clouds, The Lingering Garden, Suzhou

The next similar building is the *Jianshan lou* (The Mountain-in-View Tower) in the *Zhuozheng yuan* (The Humble Administrator's Garden).

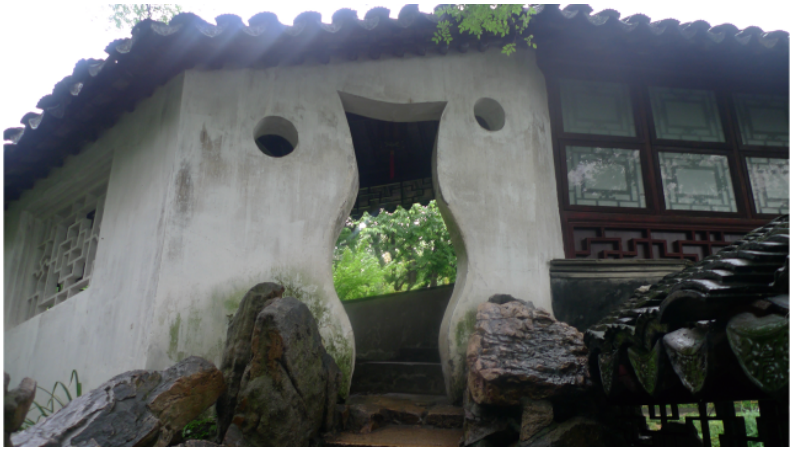

Figure 7: The Mountain-in-View Tower, The Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou

Artfulness and Simplicity

The Tree-Nest was more complex than those clever constructions, because it combined two opposite qualities— artfulness and simplicity. The Chinese term of the Tree-Nest—*pu*—means both the pine tree and simplicity. Mao Xiang write in his essays and poems that he had the Tree-Nest built to emulate the simple, modest life-style of the ancients who nested on trees. The simple life-style he looked for was also associated with his pursuit of spiritual independence. Because the Tree-Nest dangled on the tree top, it seemed to rest on nothing. This in turn made Mao Xiang feel that he, like the Tree-Nest, was free of worldly concerns: "Fleeing from the world, I should feel self-realized. / Standing alone, at last I have nothing to rest on."[6] He thus took the Tree-Nest as his alter ego, naming after it both his studio and his literary collections. On the other hand, the Tree-Nest was artful and artefactual, creating illusory effects. Mao also had hundreds of plum trees planted near the pavilion, a tower built in the center of the plum grove, and described the view as illusory as mirages. He invited many friends to visit the pavilion and write poems on it, and exchanged his poems with his friends. All these writings emphasize the opposed qualities of the Tree-Nest. Take two poems written by his friends Fan Jingwen (1587-1644) and Ni Yuanlu (1593-1644) as examples.

Its root has had its fill of windblown surging waters since high antiquity. / Here I should look at this nest twice. / Luckily it's a plant without value, like the useless *chu* tree. / But it turns out to be a country in the ash tree. / Suddenly a path appears, leading through to the terrace and kiosk. / Birds in flight have no home, lodging their feathers here. / Artful, natural, simple, and lacking polish, / The great tree still remains, sleeping at the river bank.[7]

In the third line, Fan alludes to the stories of useless trees in the Taoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*. Useless trees are able to grow old, exactly because they are useless, unfit to be made into anything. The tree on which Mao's pavilion was built was such a useless tree, like an unsophisticated person left to live his simple life. However, the next line suggests that the tree opened a window to illusions, by alluding to a ninth-century

[6] Mao Xiang, "Twenty Rhymes on the Tree-Nest When It was Built," in *Tongren ji*, 5.22.
[7] *Tongren ji*, 5.14.

tale, "The Governor of Nanke" ("The Governor of the Southern Branch Commandery"). In the tale, a demoted official dreams of visiting the country in an ash tree, where he becomes the prime minister, marries the king's daughter, and enjoys all the pleasures of life for twenty years, only to find his wealth and rank taken away in the end. After waking up, he finds outside his house an ash tree with a nest of ants. He then realizes that he in the dream has entered the kingdom of ants, and thus is enlightened about the illusory nature of life. If the useless tree symbolizes simplicity, the tree that leads to illusion is a token of pleasure and enchantment. The opposed alternatives collapse in the last couplet to a single oxymoron, *gongqiao tiancheng*, meaning both artful and natural.

Ni's poem begins with the malleable nature of the Tree-Nest. Its shape evoked a ladle, a boat, and a cave. It could either sail to the legendary River of Stars, or lead to the realm of immortals as found in the Taoist classics. However, the description of the Tree-Nest's illusory effects is balanced by the discourse of its simplicity in the third couplet, which suggests how Mao was content with his simple life as a bird is with a single branch.

You lodge your life neither on land nor on water. / Your chamber is like both a ladle and a boat. / It's an entrance to Heaven, Small Presence Heaven. / You look down over where there is no Earth, like Master Hill Adrift. / A single branch makes one feel the tree-nest is secure. / One should pity the bird circling the tree three times around. / It can be a raft sailing to the River of Stars. / Why would one envy the plans of the sparrows, who fly no further than mulberry or elm?[8]

The juxtaposition of simplicity and artful illusions is also found in other writings on the Tree-Nest. Mao's friends called him a *yiren* (a rare, strange person), his tree a *yishu* (a rare, strange tree), applauded the Tree-Nest as *qihuan* (a marvel) or *huangou* (an illusory construction), and described their experiences in the Tree-Nest as making them feel like both birds and fish, but they always returned to the moral message of simplicity. Everyone could own a simple life, and recluses could embrace simplicity, but only the wealthy and privileged could enjoy artful illusions made possible by such an artifact as the Tree-Nest. Such opposed alternatives marked the vitality of Mao Xiang's period.

Poetics of No Place

That period would face an abrupt end ten years later. It was no coincidence that the two poets quoted above died the same year in 1644. In the spring of 1644, the peasant rebels seized Beijing and occupied the Forbidden City. The last Ming emperor, Chongzhen, abandoned by many of his ministers, took his life by hanging himself in a tree in the garden of the palace. The two poets were among the officials who followed the emperor by committing suicide. In the summer of that year, Manchu troops aided by Chinese collaborators marched into the capital and declared the Qing dynasty. Meanwhile peasant rebels sacked Rugao. After Mao Xiang was forced to flee the city, the Tree-Nest was destroyed. The Tree-Nest was a symbol of the aesthetic tastes of the early seventeenth century, and its collapse signified the end of that period.

[8] *Tongren ji*, 5.14.

Mao Xiang returned to his hometown in 1646. In the next few years, he participated in the underground anti-Qing resistance, but his effort was of little avail. From the 1650s onward, he devoted his life to creating his private sphere, having the Water Garden expanded and new sites built. He also made his garden a haven for the descendants of many of his close friends who died in the war and violence during the dynastic transition or in the anti-Qing resistance. Some of them had lived in his garden for more than ten years, receiving his guidance, and writing extensively on his estate, before they ventured out into the world. He continued to host literary gatherings in the estate, exchanging poems with his guests, and entertaining them with the theatrical performances of his family troupe. These activities represented his attempt to continue the literati culture of the Ming, despite the political discontinuation.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic tastes and life-style of the Ming only belonged to the past. Beneath the seeming continuation of Mao's artistic pursuits lay subtle variations. He turned the title of the Water Garden into the Water Temple, because after the dynastic transition he began to enjoy the company of monks, and thought that the monks should be the real master of his garden. The associations of simplicity and austerity with the temple and monastic life differ drastically from luxury and enchantment promised by the garden. Mao and his friends continued to write on the ruins of the Tree-Nest and the adjacent bridge. These writings, in particular, suggest that a new poetics of space appeared after the dynastic transition and began to replace the old aesthetic tastes. Ji Yingzhong's (1609-1681) poem on the ruins of the Tree-Nest ends with these lines: "One realizes there is no place for an awl to stand on the whole earth. / Here it is alone outstanding, the feeling of high antiquity."[9] Gu Mengyou (1599-1660) writes: "In an alienating land, I force myself to raise a cup of wine. / … Lodging on a single branch, reaching the far ridge."[10] The Tree-Nest that neither rested on land nor on water evoked the literati's feeling of having lost their homes, been displaced, or been forced to live as exiles during the dynastic transition. The Tree-Nest had contributed to these literati's celebration of optical illusions, but now their delight in illusions gave way to the sadness in the new poetics of no place. Indeed, the phrase and idea of "no place" are often found in the writings of the Ming loyalists. "Over nine continents, no place to bewail mountains and rivers" (Chen Zilong [1608-47]). "Just when in all under heaven there is no place for mountains and waters" (Qu Dajun [1630-96]). The special design of the Tree-Nest allowed the loyalists to feel that they stood in the middle of nowhere and beyond the territory of the new regime, while lamenting over their displacement.

In 1684, fifty years after the construction of the Tree-Nest, Mao Xiang came across another big, old tree, this time behind the ruins of his ancestors' house. Amazed by his discovery, he writes: "Heaven returns my Tree-Nest to me." He had his studio built beside the tree, and named the studio *huanpu*, "Returning to Simplicity" or "Recovering Simplicity." As the title suggests, the antithesis of simplicity and artfulness was replaced by the focus on simplicity.

Fifty years ago, I nested on the tree. / At the age of seventy-four, the tree/simplicity returns to my nest. / For several generations, the fragrance is kept in my former fort. /

[9] *Tongren ji*, 5.17.
[10] Ibid.

After waking up from the dream under the southern branch, I lodge on the empty gourd. / No single branch ruined, its life has been preserved. / I'm used to being quiet, only observing the lines of the hexagrams of the *Classic of Changes*.[11]

Mao indicated that he woke up from the dream of the tree, a period when he and his friends had enjoyed pleasures and been fascinated by artfulness and optical illusions. Now the period was regarded as an illusion. The tree that had survived the war and violence had an affinity with Mao, who had outlived most of his contemporaries. Many of them either perished in the war and the cause of recovering the Ming, or disgraced themselves by serving in the new regime and collaborating with it. He attributed his fortune to the moral meanings associated with the old tree—simplicity, modesty, and perseverance. Since the tree grew behind his ancestors' house, its root naturally evoked the root of his family, his lineage. He inferred that the tree symbolized the family legacy, and that he was awarded the tree because he carried on the merits of his family. Mao's claim of studying *The Classic of Changes* in the end well suggests his way of coming to terms with political changes and the vicissitudes of life. After all, the hexagram 24 is named *fu* (returning), and the basic teaching of *The Classic of Changes* is that everything is in the process of changes. The cyclic idea of time means returning to the beginning point to start the circle again, and filial piety suggests resorting to the moral authority of ancestors to redeem lost individuals. Both seem to promise the recovering of the loss by invoking the origin.

Conclusion

The Ming literati's fascination with artfulness and strangeness in architectural constructions was closely related to their interest in the theater, the domain of fantasy and illusion. It was no coincidence that Mao Xiang even wrote a play named *Story of the Tree-Nest*. The play, no longer extant, seems to share the same fate as its subject. The same can be said for the Ming literati's fascination with artfulness and illusion. The Tree-Nest captured this fascination, but it also showed Mao's attempt to emulate the simple life of the ancients. Only when the pavilion collapsed and the tree alone was left after the conquest did the Tree-Nest recover its original significance and invite Mao and his friends to contemplate what it meant to live on a tree while no place was left for them in the world. Not only did the Tree-Nest recover its original significance, but it also heralded a new poetics of space. The records surrounding this particular site of Mao Xiang's estate indicate how the city survived the destruction, how destruction led to reconstruction, and how the literati culture of the Ming was commemorated.

[11] Ibid., 10.7.

References

Clunas, Craig. (1996). *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Li, Wai-yee. (2012). "Gardens and Illusions from Late Ming to Early Qing." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 72.2, 295-336.

Mao, Xiang. (1997). *Tongren ji*. In *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu*, vol. 385. Tainan: Zhuangyan wenhua shiye youxian gongsi.

Meyer-Fong, Tobie. (2003). *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Spence, Jonathan D. (2007). *Return to Dragon Mountain: Memories of a Late Ming Man*. New York: Penguin Books.

Zhang, Dai. (2014). *Tao'an mengyi*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.