

## **Graduate Research Essay**

# **IN LIEU OF FLOWERS: The Transformation of Space and Self in Yuan Mei's (1716-1798) Garden Records**

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Among the most fascinating figures of eighteenth-century Jiangnan is the poet, essayist and literary critic Yuan Mei 袁枚 (*zi* Zicai 子才, *hao* Jianzhai 簡齋, Cunzhai 存齋, *Suiyuan* 隨園).<sup>1</sup> In 1752 he retired permanently from official life, and moved his family into his recently acquired Garden of Accommodation (*Suiyuan* 隨園) in Nanjing. For the next four decades, Yuan was to figure prominently in the often heated debates regarding women, literature and morality that characterised the intellectual history of the mid Qing, and he is perhaps best known for his scandalous views concerning the education of his female disciples. Given his salient role in eighteenth-century thought and debate it is somewhat surprising that so little attention has been paid to Yuan Mei in Western scholarship. The only extensive biography of Yuan remains that of Arthur Waley, published in 1956. Moreover, while Yuan's poetry may be found scattered throughout various anthologies, his prose has largely been ignored.

This paper presents an analysis of Yuan Mei's 'Record of My Garden of Accommodation' (*Suiyuan ji* 隨園記) and its five sequels, written over a 21-year period during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The analysis

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<sup>1</sup> For Yuan Mei's biographical details see Arthur Waley, *Yuan Mei: Eighteenth Century Chinese Poet* (New York: Grove Press, 1956). See also A. W. Hummel (ed.), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period, 1644-1912* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1943) pp.955-57 and W. H. Nienhauser (ed.), *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) pp.956-58. The six garden records discussed in this paper are those found in Wang Yingzhi (ed.), *Yuan Mei quanji* (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1993) Vol.2 pp.204-10. Unless otherwise attributed, the translations of Yuan Mei's works cited in this paper are my own. I would like to thank Duncan Campbell for his invaluable guidance and friendship, without which this paper would not have been possible.

includes comparisons with the records of late-Ming garden owners, and highlights the differences between Yuan's account and those of others. Yuan's record is shown to be a temporal narrative, which departs from the static garden depictions presented by previous writers. It is a rational account of the temporal processes of nature, with no sign of the 'obsession' discourse that characterises the works of Yuan's predecessors. Two of the six records are included in translation at the conclusion of this paper.

Against a background of criticism on grounds of morality, Yuan Mei seeks in his garden records to explain both his Garden and his life, couching his discourse in the language of the Confucian tradition. Attempting to legitimise himself by association with important texts such as the *Book of Changes*, Yuan sees his Garden as a means to fulfilling the functions of the Confucian gentleman, with respect to scholarship, public service, and filial piety. In this sense, the Garden is to be read as autobiographical, as well as the embodiment of Yuan's own poetic theory. Thus the study of Yuan Mei's garden records provides us with an invaluable insight into the thought and self-awareness of one of the period's most eccentric figures.

## THE GARDEN TRANSFORMED

Yuan Mei's account of his Garden of Accommodation consists of six records, spanning two decades, the first of which is dated 1749. Yuan's garden records are unusual, if not unique, in that they are accounts of a single site by one author over an extended period of time.<sup>2</sup> Thus they are a fascinating and important resource for the study of garden literature, introducing into the depiction of landscape a temporal aspect, usually absent from the static records provided by authors of previous and subsequent garden records. In his valuable discussion of Chinese narrative theory, Andrew Plaks identifies spatial composition as the primary focus of Chinese fiction.<sup>3</sup> He notes a traditional emphasis on the interweaving of smaller narrative units over the maintenance of a discernable unitary structure, explaining the apparently 'episodic' character of the Chinese novel.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Chinese garden records have tended to be spatial accounts, consisting of descriptions of sites and events that do not necessarily fall into a supporting narrative framework. They are 'episodic' in Plaks' sense. By contrast, Yuan Mei's six records of his Garden of Accommodation emphasise the process of transformation, and unnecessary spatial details are excluded.

Without doubt the most striking omission from the records is a detailed description of the Garden itself. Yuan Mei offers the reader only vague

<sup>2</sup> There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Yuan Mei planned to compose any more than one record in 1749. By his own admission Yuan, at the time of his first record, had not made up his mind as to the length of his stay at the Garden of Accommodation (see my translation of Yuan's first record, below).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew H. Plaks, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative' in Plaks (ed.), *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977): 309-52 (pp.329-34).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

references to the physical appearance of the site. We learn for example, of the plum and cassia trees, and the “ten thousand bamboos like a sea of green”. Of the buildings we are told that where one ends another begins, and that the windows provide a pleasant respite from the freezing winter breeze. We learn also that Yuan has created a detailed model of Hangzhou’s West Lake, including its dikes, wells, bridges and peaks. This is Yuan’s garden description at its most descriptive, and yet it does not approach the level of detail employed by other authors such as Qi Biaoja (祁彪佳 1602-45) in his own record of ‘Allegory Mountain’.<sup>5</sup>

The importance ascribed to the naming of garden features has been well noted by scholars such as Craig Clunas and John Makeham.<sup>6</sup> The desire among all Ming and Qing garden owners to inventory their properties in terms of *nameable* sites reflects the crucial role played by names in the construction of meaning within the designed space. As this was usually achieved by allusion to historical or literary figures and places, the naming of features was a task that drew on all of the knowledge and learning of the garden designer. Thus we see the naming of sites in the Grand View Garden (*Daguan Yuan* 大觀園) become a means for Jia Zheng 賈政 to check his son’s academic progress, in the Qing classic the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢).<sup>7</sup> A century earlier, the late-Ming literary figure Zhang Dai (張岱 1599-1684?) had claimed that “the most difficult thing about making a garden is naming; it is even more difficult than the physical construction”.<sup>8</sup>

Given the emphasis afforded by other scholars to the naming of garden features, the lack of any inventory of named sites in Yuan Mei’s records is startling. The sites of Yuan’s Garden of Accommodation had, of course, been named, as he himself notes in his fifth record: “every part [of this Garden] has been named and had its praises sung in turn”. This is confirmed in *Xiaocangshanfang shiji* 小倉山房詩記 (Collected Poems of the Little Granary Hill Residence), in which Yuan distinguishes 24 named sites within the Garden,<sup>9</sup> and subsequent research points to the existence of at least 46.<sup>10</sup> The absence of an inventory of sites in Yuan Mei’s records can be explained in part by the shift from spatial composition to temporal narrative identified above. Further, it is indicative of the emphasis placed on the overall *idea* of the Garden, rather than the Garden itself. While the sites within the space have not been identified, the naming of the space itself is the major subject of the first record. It is the ‘*sui*’ 隨 or ‘accommodation’ which is emphasised by Yuan, rather than the resulting garden features. Thus, as Roger T. Ames identifies: “what one finally ‘sees’ in a work of art is the creative act that produced it”, with the *process* of garden design becoming the repository of

<sup>5</sup> Qi Biaoja, ‘Footnotes to Allegory Mountain’ trans. Duncan Campbell, in *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 19 (3/4) 1999: 243-71.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996) pp.144-8, and John Makeham, ‘The Confucian Role of Names in Traditional Chinese Gardens’ in *Studies in the History of Designed Landscapes* 18 (3) 1988: 187-210.

<sup>7</sup> Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol.1, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books, 1973) pp.324-352.

<sup>8</sup> Makeham, ‘Confucian Role of Names’ p.193.

<sup>9</sup> Yuan Mei, ‘*Suiyuan ershisi yong*’ [24 Odes to the Garden of Accommodation] in *Yuan Mei quanji* Vol.1: 298-303.

<sup>10</sup> Gu Yuanxiang, *Suiyuan shishuo de yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1988) pp.26-9.

meaning.<sup>11</sup> By omitting the features of the Garden of Accommodation from his records, Yuan has left the reader with no option but to see the process. Although we do not know what all of the features look like, we know from Yuan's first record that they were all "achieved by accommodating to the shape of the land...rather than letting natural obstacles hinder our progress".

If Yuan Mei is reluctant to present a detailed depiction of the Garden of Accommodation, then he is equally concerned to dismiss a single representation of himself. In 1781 he returns a portrait by Luo Ping (羅聘 1733-1799), citing his 'two selves': "the self which exists in the eyes of my family is one self, and the self which exists in Luo Ping's painting is another self".<sup>12</sup> Yuan goes on to say that as his family does not recognise the picture as being a good likeness, it might one day be destroyed by mistake, and as such, would be safer back in the possession of the artist.<sup>13</sup> What we are reading is clearly Yuan's polite way of rejecting a portrait that he considers to be unflattering. Nevertheless, viewed in the context of the present discussion, the concept of Yuan's multiple selves may help to explain the lack of description contained in the six records. The Garden of Accommodation is to be seen as a changing entity, where the process of its creation and the concept of accommodation are critical. A detailed description or map would capture just one 'self' of the Garden, just as in his portrait, Luo Ping captured just one 'self' of the garden owner.

Although he does not describe or name any features *within* the Garden of Accommodation, Yuan Mei provides in his records numerous references to historical locations *outside* of the Garden itself. At the top of Little Granary Hill we are told, each of Nanjing's most magnificent vistas "floats into sight". Yuan's 'magnificent vistas' are historical locations scattered around Nanjing, such as Bell Mountain (*Zhongshan* 鐘山) and the Terrace of Raining Flowers (*Yuhuatai* 雨花臺), and as noted above, the focus of his fifth record is Hangzhou's famous West Lake. Whereas the detailed description of sites within the Garden of Accommodation would have been superfluous, or even detrimental to Yuan Mei's records, the identification of historical locations outside of the Garden is important. By documenting those locations visible from the top of Little Granary Hill, Yuan draws on the associations of ascent with the contemplation of the past, a practice identified by Hans Frankel in his discussion of Tang poetry.<sup>14</sup> This functions in two ways. First, the borrowing of views (*jie jing* 借景) adds value to Yuan's Garden, not only by adding

<sup>11</sup> Roger T. Ames, 'Meaning as Imaging: Prolegomena to a Confucian Epistemology' cited in Stanislaus Fung's 'Longing and Belonging in Chinese Garden History' in Michel Conan (ed.), *Perspectives on Garden Histories* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1999): 205-19 (p.209).

<sup>12</sup> James Cahill, 'A Rejected Portrait by Lo P'ing: Pictorial Footnote to Waley's *Yüan Mei*' in *Asia Major* 7 1959: 32-9 (p.33) [romanisation altered]. See also Waley, *Yuan Mei* pp.119-20.

<sup>13</sup> Cahill, 'Rejected Portrait' p.34. For a discussion of the traditional disbelief that painting might faithfully represent the 'true self', see Wu Pei-yi's 'Varieties of the Chinese Self' in Vytautas Kavolis (ed.), *Designs of Selfhood* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1984): 107-31.

<sup>14</sup> Hans H. Frankel, 'The Contemplation of the Past in T'ang Poetry' in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973): 345-65 (pp.345-7).

aesthetic qualities, but also by appropriating the cultural and historical connotations inherent in those locations.<sup>15</sup> Thus the site of the Garden of Accommodation is established as one of quality. Second, in the context of the discourse of temporality, the evocation of historical allusions serves the function of commenting on the passage of time, and the longevity of the Hill. Yuan's acknowledgement of the previous owner of his Garden, a certain Sui Hede 隋赫德, also functions as a comment on the passing of time, a theme that was to become increasingly important in his works. He would later claim that the Garden, formerly the property of the Cao family, was the Grand View Garden portrayed in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and would often wonder, "Who will follow after I have left?"<sup>16</sup>

### THE SELF TRANSFORMED

Perhaps as surprising as the lack of any description of the Garden of Accommodation in Yuan Mei's records, is the lack of reference to people. Aside from historical and literary figures, the only person mentioned in any detail is Yuan himself. We hear a vague reference to a younger brother, a nephew, a mother and a father, but nothing more. Several important people are omitted completely, including Yuan's wife, concubines and carpenter Wu Longtai 武龍臺, who was buried in the Garden of Accommodation after his death in 1753.<sup>17</sup>

No visitors to the Garden (of whom we know there were many)<sup>18</sup> are mentioned, nor are any activities which took place on the site. In view of the violent criticism voiced against his teaching of women at the Garden of Accommodation (which will be discussed in more detail below), it is conceivable that Yuan Mei did not wish to draw added attention to the people or activities carried out on the site. However, given his apparent indifference to the criticism, as well as the fact that he was only too happy to publish the poetical works of his female students under the title *Suiyuan nüdizi shixuan* 隨園女弟子詩選 (The Collected Poems of the Master of the Garden of

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of borrowing views, see Joanna F. Handlin Smith, 'Gardens in Ch'i Piao-chia's Social World: Wealth and Values in Late-Ming Kiangnan' in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 51 (1) Feb 1992: 55-81 (pp.70-1), and Andrew H. Plaks, *Archetype and Allegory in the Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) pp.164-5.

<sup>16</sup> Yuan Mei 'Miscellaneous Feelings in the Sui Garden' translated by Jonathan Chaves in Victor Mair (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 297-99. The Garden, of course, was completely destroyed in 1853, when the Taiping rebels reached Nanjing. For a discussion of the argument that Yuan Mei's Garden of Accommodation was the *Daguanyuan*, see Wu Shih-ch'ang, *On the Red Chamber Dream* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) pp.137-44, and Jonathan D. Spence, *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-his Emperor, Bondservant and Master* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) pp.301-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Yuan Mei quanji* Vol.1 p.167, and Waley, *Yuan Mei* p.70. For a complete list of Yuan's concubines, see Gu, *Suiyuan shishuo* pp.24-5.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Robyn Hamilton's 'The Pursuit of Fame: Luo Qilan (1755-1813?) and the Debates about Women and Talent in Eighteenth-Century Jiangnan' in *Late Imperial China* 18 (1) June 1997: 39-71.

Accommodation's Female Disciples), this explanation seems unlikely. Rather, the omission of others from the records is a reflection of Yuan's exclusive association of himself with his Garden. In this sense the six records are to be read as autobiographical accounts of Yuan's life, structured around the organisational framework of the Garden.<sup>19</sup>

If the records are viewed as autobiographical, then the need for the Garden's individuality becomes clearer. In his 1749 account, Yuan makes reference to the Garden's 'uniqueness' (*qi* 奇). This may help to explain the absence of any reference to previous gardens, or any of the garden literature that would have been available to him. Garden records such as that of Qi Biao or Zhang Dai were almost certainly read by Yuan.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, considering the similarity of language used, it seems likely that Yuan was also well aware of the seventeenth-century classic *Yuanye* 園冶 (The Craft of Gardens), written by the late-Ming landscape gardener Ji Cheng (計成 b.1582). In his chapter on 'The Theory of Construction', for example, Ji Cheng emphasises the importance of following (*sui* 隨) the lie of the land, using language similar to that of Yuan's first record.<sup>21</sup> That Yuan Mei was unaware of the garden sources seems unlikely, and he appears to confirm this when he uses the phrase "the way of gardening" (*yuanlin zhi dao* 園林之道) in his third record.

## THE GARDEN JUSTIFIED

In the context of his examination of garden culture in the late Ming, Craig Clunas highlights the garden's shift from being a space of 'production', to being one belonging to the problematic category of 'consumption'.<sup>22</sup> He notes that by 1642, words such as 'excess' and 'extravagance' pervaded writings about gardens, rather than "references to the morally ennobling sphere of productive resources" which had previously been emphasised.<sup>23</sup> It is against this background that we find the discourse of obsession (*pi* 癖) emerging in the records of late-Ming garden owners. Indeed, as Judith Zeitlin notes, obsession had become an important component of *all* aspects of late-Ming culture, and was, according to many notable figures of the period,

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the autobiographical concept see Wu, 'Chinese Self' and his *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), in which he notes that by the late Ming the explosion of autobiographical expression had spread to genres not always recognisable as 'self-literature' (p.196). Interesting in the context of the present discussion is Wu's observation that the autobiographer "must adopt at least an implied temporal scheme" (p.95).

<sup>20</sup> Yuan Mei was, by his own account, an avid reader. "The moment I awake", he once wrote, "I long for my library and bound towards it, swift as a thirsty cat". See 'Thoughts on Master Huang's Book Borrowing' trans. D.E. Pollard in *Renditions* 33 and 34, Spring and Autumn 1990: 193.

<sup>21</sup> Zhang Jiaji, *Yuanye quanshi* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1993) p.162. For an English translation see Alison Hardie trans., *The Craft of Gardens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) p.39.

<sup>22</sup> Clunas, *Fruitful Sites* pp.70-1.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p.70.

something that a gentleman could not be without.<sup>24</sup> Thus we find Qi Biaoqia for example, referring to the construction of his garden as his ‘crazy obsession’ (*chi pi* 癡癖), in his ‘*Yushan zhu*’ 寓山注 (Footnotes to Allegory Mountain).<sup>25</sup>

The late-Ming craze for obsession can be read as part of a wider cultural response to issues facing members of the Chinese literati at that time. Set in a period when elite discourse focused largely on extravagance and loyalty to office, the evolution of obsession as an accepted, even *respected* concept can be seen in part as a justification for ongoing consumptive practices. However, by the eighteenth century these issues had, to a certain extent been resolved. In Yuan Mei’s records we find none of the references to obsession, craving, or addiction that characterise the writings of earlier garden owners. Although he seeks at one level to justify the Garden in terms of its being the cause of his retirement from an official career, Yuan expresses no guilt about the consumptive aspect of his Garden. Yuan’s are *rational* justifications, which reflect his own level of self-awareness.

Yuan Mei’s main objective is to show that despite rejecting an official career, he is still able to carry out his role as a member of Qing society. Thus the ownership of a garden is said in the second record to be analogous to holding office, with the added advantage that he can act on his own initiative. Next, the design and ownership of gardens is likened to scholarship, and the raising of trees is shown to be the same as the raising of one’s sons. Finally, Yuan shows that he can carry out his filial duties by burying his late father on a site just a moment’s walk from the Garden itself. This is a clear departure from the traditional associations of the garden with Tao Qian (陶潛 365-427) and the idea of a refuge from society.<sup>26</sup> The language used is that of orthodox Confucianism - Yuan has not neglected his obligations the way Qi Biaoqia had admitted to doing.<sup>27</sup> Rather, the Garden has allowed him to fulfil his obligations to society and family, to an even greater degree. Through the act of garden management, Yuan can play a far more important role than merely holding office, while devoting time to his studies, overseeing the upbringing of his sons, and showing due respect to his parents. While Yuan *expresses* no guilt about his devoting his time and energy to his garden, his constant justifications draw attention to his underlying self-consciousness. One is almost tempted to think that he is himself obsessed with the idea that he has neglected his duty to society, and that his attempts to explain his life are aimed at himself as much as at his detractors.

To back up his arguments, Yuan Mei draws from the Confucian canon. Throughout the records he cites the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) both directly and indirectly. Indeed, the Garden of Accommodation becomes for

<sup>24</sup> Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) pp.69-74. Zeitlin cites among others Zhang Dai, who claimed, “One cannot befriend a man without obsessions, for he lacks deep emotion; nor can one befriend a man without faults, for he lacks integrity” (p.69).

<sup>25</sup> Qi, ‘Allegory Mountain’ p.247. See also Handlin Smith, ‘Ch’i Piao-chia’s Social World’ pp.59-64.

<sup>26</sup> The traditional associations of gardens with the recluse have been called into question by scholars such as Handlin Smith, ‘Ch’i Piao-chia’s Social World’ pp.64-6, and Clunas, *Fruitful Sites* pp.94-5.

<sup>27</sup> Qi, ‘Allegory Mountain’ p.263.

Yuan the embodiment of the *Changes*, and a way of understanding the temporal processes of nature.<sup>28</sup> Richard Smith has shown that by Qing times, the *Changes* provided guidance in every realm of Chinese life, from the very important to the most mundane problems.<sup>29</sup> Yuan Mei is clearly no exception. In 1768, he consulted the *Changes* about a loose tooth, obtaining an omen that he interpreted to mean, “it will certainly have to be pulled out”.<sup>30</sup> In his fifth record (also written in 1768) Yuan cites a passage from Hexagram 22 (*bi* 賁) and the accompanying commentary by Wang Bi (王弼 226-249), to give authority to the ongoing adornment of his Garden.

Other important sources give further authority to Yuan’s garden accounts. He uses a line from the *Book of Mencius* to show that his method of garden construction is consistent with the way of the sages.<sup>31</sup> Yuan legitimises his construction of a miniature West Lake (that is, a model of the scenic focus of his home) by citing the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, in which a man is praised for “playing an air of his country, showing that he has not forgotten his roots”. Among others mentioned are Confucius himself, Tao Qian and Su Shi (蘇軾 1037-1101), who once opined, to the delight of Yuan Mei some seven centuries later, that “a gentleman need not serve in government, nor need he reject government service”. The arguments exemplify the idea of the ‘self invented’ to which Wu Pei-yi refers in his examination of Chinese autobiography:<sup>32</sup> Yuan has become the archetypal Confucian gentleman.

Clearly then, while Yuan Mei does not feel the need to justify the Garden of Accommodation in terms of obsession, he does make every attempt to explain his life within the Garden in terms of orthodox Confucian morality.<sup>33</sup> However, these explanations did not help him to “escape the criticisms of superior men” as he had hoped, and as time passed he became more and more the subject of reproach. Most notable among his detractors was Zhang Xuecheng (章學誠 1738-1801), who took exception, among other things, to Yuan’s position as champion of women’s role as creative writers. The Yuan-Zhang debates centred on the long-standing conflict between talent (*cai* 才) and virtue (*de* 德) in Chinese society, and held to be especially scandalous was the way in which Yuan Mei surrounded himself with female disciples.<sup>34</sup> Yuan, who held that poetry should be an expression of emotion

<sup>28</sup> Yuan’s equating his Garden (and self) with the *Changes* was not unprecedented. Several centuries earlier Yang Jian (1141-1226) had opined: “It is not correct to take the *Book of Changes* as representing the transformations of heaven and earth, and not the transformations of the self...The transformations are my transformations”. See Wu, ‘Chinese Self’ p.111.

<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Smith, *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) p.108.

<sup>30</sup> Waley, *Yuan Mei* p.98.

<sup>31</sup> The line quoted is from Book IV, Part B, Para. 8: “Only when a man will not do some things is he capable of doing great things”, see D. C. Lau trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970) p.129.

<sup>32</sup> Wu, *Confucian’s Progress* pp.160-203.

<sup>33</sup> On Yuan Mei’s citing of Confucius to support his own views elsewhere, see James J. Y. Liu’s *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) pp.136-40.

<sup>34</sup> See Kang-I Sun Chang, ‘Ming-Qing Women Poets and the Notions of “Talent” and “Morality”’ in Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong and Pauline Yu (eds.), *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford: Stanford



with the purpose of giving pleasure, found himself under constant attack from Zhang, who described the poet as “a menace to public morality”.<sup>35</sup>

This aspect of Yuan Mei’s poetic theory is also important to note here. According to Yuan:

Poetry is what expresses one’s nature and emotion. It is enough to look no further than one’s self [for the material of poetry]. If its words move the heart, its colours catch the eye, its taste pleases the mouth, and its sound delights the ear, then it is good poetry.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, while the poet should preserve the natural feelings of a child, he should at the same time possess a high degree of sensibility ingrained in his nature.<sup>37</sup> Yuan’s theories on the source and function of poetry are startlingly similar to those of Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道 1568-1610) and the Gong’an 公安 School, active around the turn of the seventeenth century. It seems highly unlikely that Yuan Mei had not read the works of the three Yuan brothers, although their names are conspicuously absent from his works, and Qing government policies would have made the acquisition of Gong’an literature extremely difficult. This last point perhaps goes some way towards explaining the omission, but it is also possible that the anti-imitative aspect of Yuan Mei’s literary theories prevented his attributing too much to his late-Ming predecessors.

The real difference between Yuan Mei and the late-Ming expressionists is that by the mid eighteenth century the former was virtually a lone voice in defence of poetic self-expression and originality. While we have seen that Yuan’s records depart in several important ways from those of late-Ming garden owners, the same cannot be said of his poetic theory. The idea that poetry should reveal the poet’s ‘natural sensibility’ (*xingling* 性靈) clearly owes much to Gong’an literary thought, and echoes Yuan Mei’s theory of garden construction as articulated in his records. Nature speaks through Yuan in both his poetry and his Garden. Thus he is an individualist in the sense of James Liu’s discussion of poetic theory,<sup>38</sup> as well as in the context of garden theory, in which his Garden is a reflection of the owner.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the issues discussed here that the records of Yuan Mei’s Garden of Accommodation can be interpreted in several different (but I would argue not *mutually exclusive*) ways. First, the Garden is to be read as autobiographical. Yuan’s six accounts begin with a record of the Garden’s

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University Press, 1997): 236-58 (p.236). Robyn Hamilton has recently cast doubt on the image of Yuan as a licentious old man, showing that his group included his sisters, cousins and a mother-daughter pair. See ‘Pursuit of Fame’ p.41.

<sup>35</sup> David S. Nivison, *The Life and Thought of Chang Hsüeh-ch’eng (1738-1801)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966) p.256.

<sup>36</sup> James J.Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1962) p.73.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p.74.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* pp.70-6.

creation, then deal with intellect, emotion and ambition, before ending with an account of death, burial and immortality. Indeed, Yuan makes the point more explicitly in his record of 1753, in which he makes a connection between his own health and the state of the Garden, as if the two were inextricably linked. The Garden accounts present a temporal narrative of the lives of both the Garden and its owner, and the identification of historical figures and sites outside of the Garden reinforces this idea of growth and development over time. Moreover, the acknowledgement of the Garden's previous owner, a certain Sui Hede, and the discussion of the permanence of the site even after the owner's death, present the processes of nature as cyclical, with Yuan's acquisition of the Garden as the beginning of a particular lifespan. As a temporal narrative, Yuan's records lack spatial details such as the description and naming of features and views, people and activities, such as one finds in the garden records of others. Missing also are references to other gardens or garden literature, highlighting the individuality of the author and creator. Finally, although not seeking to justify the extravagance of his Garden in terms of obsession, Yuan does attempt an explanation of his Garden and life, using the terms of orthodox Confucianism. His is a *rational* account of the temporal process, which shows the Garden of Accommodation as a means by which he has fulfilled his obligations to Qing society. Set against a background of criticism from scholars such as Zhang Xuecheng, Yuan attempts to legitimise himself through his records by association with the critical texts, the most important of which for Yuan, is the *Book of Changes*.

We are left then, with the question of definition. It is clear that what we are dealing with is not a 'garden record' in the same sense as the descriptive and anecdotal accounts of Qi Biaoja or Zhang Dai. Nor can Yuan's accounts be grouped along with garden instruction manuals such as Ji Cheng's *The Craft of Gardens* or certain passages in Shen Fu's (沈復 1763-1809?) *Six Records of a Floating Life*. There are no descriptions of flowers or other such mundane affairs in Yuan Mei's garden records; they are chronicles of the transformation of space and of the self, and defy an easy classification. This, no doubt, is as the Master of *Suiyuan* would have wanted it.

### **Record of My Garden of Accommodation** by Yuan Mei (1716-98)

A short walk of two *li* westwards from Nanking's North Gate Bridge brings one to Little Granary Hill. The hill springs from Bracing Mountain, and separates into two ridges, which slope downwards until they reach the bridge. The winding ridges are narrow and long, and surround a series of ponds and paddy fields - commonly referred to as "Dry River Bed". In former times, when water still flowed through this valley, Bracing Mountain provided the men of the Southern Tang [c. 907-960] with a retreat from the heat of summer - one can well imagine the whole area's magnificence then.<sup>39</sup> The

<sup>39</sup> Part of the summer residence, the buildings of the Bracing Mountain Temple (*Qingliangshan si*), may still be seen in Nanjing today. For a discussion of aspects of the

most splendid sights of the city of Nanking are generally regarded as being the Terrace of Raining Flowers in the south, the Lake of Light-heartedness in the south-west, Bell Mountain in the north, the Town of Forged Swords in the east, and the Tomb of the Filial Emperor and the Temple of the Crowing Cock in the north-east. Standing at the top of Little Granary Hill each of these magnificent vistas floats into sight. Although the Hill itself does not possess the grandeur of the rivers and the lakes, and the ever-changing patterns of cloud and mist, it nonetheless allows access to that which it lacks.

During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor [1662-1723], Master Sui<sup>40</sup> who was Imperial Textile Commissioner, began to build on Little Granary Hill's northern peak. Within this estate, he constructed a series of majestic halls and chambers, enclosed them with walls and windows, and planted a thousand *zhang* of catalpa trees and a thousand *qi* of cassia. The people flocked from the city and packed in to admire the garden, which, because of the owner's name, became known as 'Sui's Garden' [*Suiyuan*]. By the time I served in Jiangning some thirty years later,<sup>41</sup> the garden had fallen into disrepair. Its buildings were being used as a tavern, and there was an unceasing racket from the rabble that gathered. Birds hated the place and would not nest there, the plants were all withered and overgrown, and even the spring breeze seemed unable to produce a flower. One look over the property left me grief-stricken, and I enquired as to its purchase price. I was told that I might acquire it for 300 ounces of silver, and so for just a month's salary the garden became mine.

I repaired the walls and doors, replaced the eaves and applied fresh plaster. Accommodating to the Garden's heights, I established a river tower; accommodating to its hollows I built a brook pavilion. Accommodating to the land that abuts a ravine I erected a bridge, and accommodating to the rushing torrents I moored a boat. Accommodating to the land that juts up sharply, I had peaks made; and accommodating to the flatlands, where vegetation flourishes, I had the buildings constructed. Here raising the land; there lowering it; everything was achieved by accommodating to the shape of the land, and taking the various scenes from the existing contours, rather than letting natural obstacles hinder our progress.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, it came to be called 'The Garden of Accommodation' [*Suiyuan*], a name that sounds the same as the original name, but means something very different.

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history of Nanjing, see F. W. Mote, 'The Transformation of Nanking, 1350-1400' in G. William Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977): 101-53. The poetic representation of this history is discussed in Stephen Owen's 'Place: Meditation on the Past at Chin-ling' in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 50 (2) 1990: 417-57, and David B. Honey's 'Before Dragons Coiled and Tigers Crouched: Early Nanjing in History and Poetry' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115 (1) 1995: 15-25.

<sup>40</sup> Sui Hede. In fact, Sui had acquired the garden in c.1728 (Waley, *Yuan Mei* p.47), and Yuan confirms this in his subsequent writings.

<sup>41</sup> At the age of 30 *sui*, Yuan took up the position of District Magistrate at Jiangning (a district just outside of central Nanjing), where he served from 1745 to 1749.

<sup>42</sup> For the last phrase here, Yuan Mei appears to borrow from Zhuangzi. See Burton Watson trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) p.30, "Only then can he mount on the back of the wind, shoulder the blue sky, *and nothing can hinder or block him.*" (emphasis added). For an alternative translation of this passage, see Makeham's 'Confucian Role of Names' p.189.

When the work was completed,<sup>43</sup> I sighed and said “If I were to serve as an official I would see this garden perhaps once in a month; but if I were to live here I would see it every day. As I cannot have both, I will give up the office in favour of the garden”. Thereupon I applied for sick leave, and taking my younger brother Xiangting and my nephew Meijun with me,<sup>44</sup> I moved with my library of books and histories to live in the Garden of Accommodation. I have heard that Master Su [Shi (1037-1101)] once opined that “A gentleman need not serve in government, nor need he reject government service”.<sup>45</sup> Thus whether or not I take a position as an official in future, and whether my stay here is to be long or short, are also matters of accommodation. When one replaces one thing with another, the replacement must be superior to that which has been replaced. That I have seen fit to exchange my office for this garden is evidence indeed of the garden’s uniqueness.

Recorded in the third month of the *Jisi* year [1749].<sup>46</sup>

### Fifth Record of My Garden of Accommodation by Yuan Mei (1716-98)

When ambition exceeds talent, the result is happiness, while more talent than ambition leads to unhappiness. Although my own aspirations are limited, I have somehow always managed to achieve more than was expected of me. In my official career I would have happily served as director of education in a prefecture, yet somehow I attained the magistracy of an entire district. For

<sup>43</sup> The construction of buildings in the garden seems to have been largely the work of Yuan’s carpenter, Wu Longtai, although the latter gets no mention in this or in any of the subsequent garden records. In 1753, after Wu’s death, Yuan recorded that ‘all the pavilions and arbours in my garden were his work’ (Waley, *Yuan Mei* p.70). There is, however, no evidence to suggest that Yuan’s attitude towards his carpenter was atypical. Ji Cheng tells us “the master in charge of constructing a garden residence should really account for nine tenths of the work, and the workmen he employs for only one tenth”. See Hardie trans., *The Craft of Gardens* p.39.

<sup>44</sup> The brother referred to is Yuan Shu (b. 1730?) and the nephew is Lu Jian (Yuan Mei’s elder sister’s son). Yuan Shu also held official posts during his lifetime, in Henan and Guangdong, and is the subject of one of Yuan Mei’s ghost stories, for which see Waley, *Yuan Mei* p.122.

<sup>45</sup> Among the numerous publications that deal with the life and work of this famous literary and political figure, see Burton Watson trans., *Su Tung-P’o: Selections from a Sung Dynasty Poet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965) and Ronald C. Egan’s *Word, Image and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). The quotation “*Junzi bu bi shi, bu bi bu shi.*” is taken from Su’s ‘Zhang shi yuan ting ji’ [A Record of the Garden and Pavilions of Mr Zhang] which reads, in fact: “*Gu zhi junzi, bu bi shi, bu bi bu shi*” (emphasis added) or “The gentleman of ancient times was not obliged to serve in government, nor to reject government service.” See Lang Hua ed., *Jingjin Dongpo wenji shilüe* (Beijing: Wenxue guji ganxingshe, 1952) Vol.2 p.816.

<sup>46</sup> Yuan Mei was apparently as pleased with his record as he was with the garden itself. In late 1752, some three and a half years after he had completed it, he had the calligrapher Tao Yong copy the account onto a door-screen within the garden (*Yuan Mei quanji* Vol.1 p.159).

my family estate ten head of cattle would have sufficed, yet I now own a hundred *mu* of land. A single shed would have been quite adequate for my garden, and yet here I have this place, about which I have written no less than four records, and every part of which has been named and had its praises sung in turn. When I privately evaluate my desires, I find that I have exceeded them. Against all expectations, the past few years have seen me exceed even my excesses.

Some thirty years have past since I quit the banks of West Lake,<sup>47</sup> but my home is never far from my thoughts. When attending to my garden, I amuse myself by modelling its layout on that of the Lake. I have built embankments and wells, an Inner and an Outer Lake, a Flower Harbour, Six Bridges, and a Northern and a Southern Peak.<sup>48</sup> At construction time I never fail to wonder: Is it difficult for man to succeed in imitating that which has been created by Heaven?<sup>49</sup> And is the fact that I have (but for a few loose ends) completed the task, due to the strength of my abilities, or simply the result of the years of my devotion? With luck, this year will finally see it completed.

How truly outstanding! Were I to live in my old hometown, I would never be able to spend all my days at the lakeside, away from the house. But here, I can live at home while never leaving the Lake, and live away from Hangzhou, while at the same time *never* being away from it. I consider myself most fortunate, but on reflection I wonder whether it has not been the result of excessive greed. And so, I consult the *Book of Changes*, and find that the ‘Grace’ Hexagram (six in the fifth place) reads:

Grace in hills and gardens.  
The roll of silk is meagre and small.  
Humiliation, but in the end good fortune.<sup>50</sup>

Wang Bi’s [226-249] commentary adds that “to adorn objects is to damage them; but to adorn hills and gardens - fortune is not greater than this”.<sup>51</sup> This

<sup>47</sup> Yuan Mei had left Hangzhou (of which the West Lake is the major scenic focus) in 1736, when he travelled to Peking to sit the civil service examinations (Waley, *Yuan Mei* pp.19-30).

<sup>48</sup> Some of the sketches and drawings of the Garden of Accommodation show clearly the features that Yuan modelled after the West Lake, such as his own embankment, called the *Taohuadi*, or ‘Peach Blossom Causeway’. See Tong Jun, *Jiangnan yuanlin zhi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1984) map #25.

<sup>49</sup> The West Lake, of course, is largely a man-made construction. “As is characteristic of Chinese beauty spots...” we learn from Professor Tuan Yi-fu in *China* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1969) pp.124-5, “...the landscapes surrounding the lake, and the lake itself, are largely artificial. The natural scene of the Hangzhou area was a deltaic flat, sluggishly drained by a few streams. Out of the flat alluvium, islands of bedrock obtrude. When the streams were dammed, perhaps as early as the first century AD, a lake collected behind the dyke so that the basic elements of the Chinese landscape - mountains juxtaposed against alluvial banks and water - were formed” (romanisation altered). This was followed by centuries of alterations and constructions both on and around the Lake itself. For a discussion of Su Shi’s West Lake Project, as part of which the Su Embankment was constructed, see Egan’s *Word, Image and Deed* pp.113-5. Yuan’s description therefore, of the Lake as being “*tian zao*” or “created by heaven”, is a little misleading.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Grace’ (*bi*) is Hexagram number 22 in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*). The translation used here is that of Richard Wilhelm, *I Ching or Book of Changes*, English trans. Cary F. Barnes, (London: Penguin Books, 1983) p.93.

is to say that hills and gardens, being the places in which plants and trees are born, are in essence, places of purity. Thus even if one were to decorate these places with rolls of silk, the humiliation would eventually give way to good fortune. The *Zuo* Commentary recounts the story of a man who “plays an air of his country, showing that he has not forgotten his roots”.<sup>52</sup> Although my desire knows no bounds, I am nevertheless able to live in accordance with the *Changes*, while ‘playing an air’ of my own hometown. Perhaps this will allow me to escape the criticisms of superior men!

Those men of former times, who decorated their vermilion doors and plastered their magnificent gates, would build properties but not live in their creations, or else live in them for but a fleeting moment. I, on the other hand, have lived here night and day for the past twenty years. I have busied myself not only with the unceasing affairs of pavilions and terraces, but also planted the trees which I now see sprouting and growing with my own eyes, shading the cattle as they stretch up towards the heavens. Consider the lives of one’s sons and grandsons - to see every moment of their progression from infancy to adulthood, and from adulthood to old age, is something that no man can even hope for. How fortunate I have been! That this is the way of plants and trees I know, but I also realise that there will be those following me who cannot reach this understanding.

Recorded in the third month of the *Wuzi* year [1768].

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<sup>51</sup> It seems that Yuan has misquoted here: the last word ‘fortune’ (*ji*) should read ‘magnificence’ or ‘prosperity’ (*sheng*). See Sun Xingyan, *Zhouyi jijie* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937) Vol. 1 p.206.

<sup>52</sup> The *Zuo* Commentary (*Zuozhuan*), or Commentary of Mr Zuo (*Zuoshizhuan*) is believed to have been compiled as a commentary of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by a Zuo Qiuming shortly before the end of the Zhou Dynasty. The passage quoted by Yuan Mei comes from the chapter on Duke Qing, Year IX, Para. 9, which in the Legge translation reads: “The Duke repeated this conversation to Fan Wenzi, who said, “That prisoner of Chu is a superior man. He told you of the office of his father, showing that he is not ashamed of his origin. He played an air of his country, showing that he has not forgotten his old associations....His not being ashamed of his origin shows the man’s virtue; his not forgetting his old associations, his good faith.” (romanisation altered, see James Legge trans., *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960) Vol.5, pp.369-71). In quoting from this passage, Yuan again makes a small error: “...*bu wang jiu ye*” reads (see above), “...showing that he has not forgotten his old associations”, but Yuan writes “...*bu wang ben ye*”, which I have translated here as “showing that he has not forgotten his roots”.