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Daoist Concepts Pictorial Logic and Spatial Translation in Suzhou Classical Gardens

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Abstract

Research on Chinese landscape painting and classical gardens often identifies shared philosophical themes or visual resemblance, but it less frequently explains the mechanism that connects philosophical ideas to observable spatial form. This article asks how Daoist concepts are mediated by pictorial logic and translated into garden space. It adopts an interpretive comparative approach that combines close reading of Daoist and painting-theoretical texts with spatial analysis of three Suzhou gardens. The analytical procedure moves through five stages: identifying a Daoist concept, specifying a pictorial logic, translating that logic into a spatial operation, examining garden evidence, and interpreting the resulting spatial effect. The Humble Administrator's Garden is analysed through wandering, mobile viewing, and sequential circulation; the Master of the Nets Garden through being and non-being, void-solid composition, and the open-built relationship; and the Lion Grove Garden through ziran, terrain-like composition, and irregular rockery with compression and release. The comparison suggests that the painting–garden relationship can be more precisely analysed as spatial translation rather than as simple visual imitation. The study contributes a Daoist-first framework for analysing interpretive correspondence while explicitly avoiding claims of direct historical influence that the available evidence cannot establish.

Keywords: Daoist philosophy, Chinese landscape painting, Classical Chinese gardens, Spatial translation, Pictorial logic, Interpretive correspondence

Introduction

Background

Chinese landscape painting and classical garden design both organise encounters with landscape, yet they do so through different media. Painting composes mountains, water, vegetation, architecture, and human movement within a pictorial field. Gardens arrange comparable elements as spaces that are entered, traversed, framed, and revisited. Their relationship cannot therefore be reduced to resemblance. The more consequential question concerns how a visual principle becomes an operation performed by paths, thresholds, water edges, courtyards, pavilions, and rockeries.

Daoist concepts provide one intellectual context for this question. Wandering challenges the authority of a fixed viewpoint; being and non-being direct attention to the relation between material form and useful interval; and ziran describes an order that appears self-so or unforced. These concepts do not function here as universal explanations of Chinese art. They are treated as analytical tools whose relevance must be established through textual sources, pictorial specificity, and observable spatial evidence (Ames & Hall, 2003; Zhuangzi, 2009).

Previous studies

Garden history and literati culture

Studies of garden history and literati culture have situated gardens within ownership, patronage, social distinction, literary practice, and the production of elite identity. Clunas (1996) demonstrates that Ming garden

culture was material, social, and representational rather than an autonomous expression of timeless aesthetics. More recent research has further examined the Chinese literati garden as a spatial-experiential system structured through relationships among architecture, landscape, viewing position, and perceptual fields (Lu & Liu, 2023). Together, these studies establish why gardens should be understood as historically situated cultural products as well as spatial environments.

Landscape painting and garden design

A second line of research considers the relationship between painting and garden making. Classical painting theory provides concepts related to mobile viewing, multiple distance, compositional hierarchy, and the relation between void and solid (Bush & Shih, 1985). Garden treatises and subsequent scholarship discuss site adaptation, borrowed scenery, spatial arrangement, and the management of views (Ji, 1988; Kuitert, 2015; Zhou et al., 2011). More recent empirical studies have further examined how pictorial depth cues and visual composition contribute to perceived spatial depth in Chinese gardens (Tai, 2023; Zhu et al., 2022). Together, these studies support comparison between pictorial composition and spatial design, although the mediating mechanism between philosophical concepts, pictorial logic, and garden operations remains insufficiently specified.

Daoist aesthetics and landscape theory

A third line of research examines Daoist concepts in relation to landscape and visual culture. Ames and Hall's (2003) translation and philosophical interpretation of the Daodejing clarifies ziran and the productive relation between formed things and empty intervals. Zhuangzi (2009) develops wandering and freedom from fixed perspective, while Cai (2004) situates related aesthetic concepts within Six Dynasties discourse. Little and Eichman (2000) document the wider relationships among Daoist ideas, images, objects, and artistic practice. This scholarship clarifies philosophical and visual categories, but it does not by itself identify their spatial operations in gardens.

Research gap

Existing research has therefore explained garden history, painting-garden relationships, Daoist aesthetics, and measurable spatial perception as important but partly separate fields. Recent studies have analysed garden experience through phenomenology, GIS, space syntax, three- dimensional data modelling, pictorial depth cues, isovists, and virtual-reality experiments (Lu & Liu, 2023; Shen & Yu, 2024; Tai, 2023; Zhang & Su, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2022). What remains underdeveloped is a continuous analytical process linking philosophical concept, pictorial mechanism, spatial operation, and perceptual effect. Broad comparison can collapse philosophy, painting, and garden into equivalent expressions, leaving the mediating mechanism unspecified.

This article addresses that question by asking how a Daoist concept is reformulated as a pictorial logic and how that logic can then be identified as an observable spatial operation. The proposed sequence is: Daoist concept, pictorial logic, spatial operation, garden case, and spatial effect. Each transition must be justified; similarity at one level is not treated as proof of continuity across all levels.

Research contribution

The study makes two contributions. First, it proposes a Daoist-first analytical framework that inserts pictorial logic as the mediating level between philosophical concepts and garden space. Second, it tests the framework through three focused Suzhou cases and three mechanisms: mobile viewing, void- solid composition, and terrain-like composition. The result is a comparative model of philosophy, pictorial logic, and spatial strategy rather than a claim that Daoist texts directly determined the design of particular gardens.

Research design and analytical framework

Research approach

This study adopts an interpretive comparative approach. It combines close reading of selected Daoist texts and painting- theoretical texts with spatial analysis of garden layouts, author field observation, and photographic documentation of the three selected gardens. Comparison occurs across three levels: concept, representation, and built spatial experience. The objective is not to prove that a specific garden designer read a specific philosophical passage. It is to determine whether a conceptually grounded pictorial

mechanism corresponds to an observable garden operation.

The term interpretive correspondence is used to define this evidentiary limit. A correspondence becomes analytically meaningful when it can be described at each intermediate stage and when the garden evidence is specific enough to be observed through movement, viewpoint, framing, enclosure, openness, water, rockery, architecture, or their relations. Historical causation would require different evidence, such as dated plans, design records, patron statements, or documented textual transmission.

Case selection

The three analytical cases are the Humble Administrator's Garden, the Master of the Nets Garden, and the Lion Grove Garden. They were selected because each combines water, architecture, rockery, circulation, framed views, and changing viewpoints, while each also foregrounds a different spatial mechanism. Their shared location in Suzhou provides a comparable garden tradition, and their different spatial configurations allow the framework to distinguish rather than merely accumulate examples. Existing spatial studies provide additional support for treating these gardens as structured perceptual environments rather than collections of isolated scenic objects (Lu & Liu, 2023; Zhang & Su, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

The Humble Administrator's Garden is used to examine sequential circulation and changing viewpoints; the Master of the Nets Garden to examine how open and built elements create spatial extension; and the Lion Grove Garden to examine irregular rockery, turning movement, and a naturalistic experience of constructed terrain. Other gardens mentioned later are illustrative examples only and do not carry the analytical burden of the study. The cases were not selected as representative of all Suzhou gardens, but because each provides especially clear spatial evidence for one of the three mechanisms examined in this study.

Analytical procedure

Step 1 Identify the Daoist concept. Define the philosophical category through a reliable classical source and specify the aspect relevant to spatial interpretation.

Step 2 Identify the pictorial logic. Locate a concrete visual or compositional mechanism in landscape-painting theory rather than relying on general resemblance.

Step 3 Translate the pictorial logic into spatial operation. Express the visual mechanism as observable spatial behaviour involving movement, viewpoint, framing, enclosure, openness, water, rockery, or architecture.

Step 4 Verify through garden cases. Examine whether the proposed operation is present in the selected garden and describe the sequence or material relationship that supports it.

Step 5 Interpret spatial effects. Assess the perceptual result, including visual sequence, spatial depth, openness, enclosure, changing views, or naturalistic experience.

Analytical criteria

Conceptual relevance. The philosophical concept must be defined through an identifiable classical source and used within a stated interpretive scope.

Pictorial specificity. The argument must identify a particular mechanism of viewing or composition; the mere presence of trees, rocks, or water is insufficient.

Spatial observability. The proposed correspondence must be visible in movement, viewpoint, framing, spatial arrangement, or a material relationship among open and built elements.

Core analytical model

Philosophical and pictorial foundations

This section establishes only the three conceptual and pictorial mechanisms required for the case analyses. It does not attempt a general history of Daoism or a comprehensive survey of painting theory.

Wandering and mobile viewing

The Zhuangzi's theme of wandering can be read as freedom from a fixed position, restricted scale, and single evaluative standpoint (Zhuangzi, 2009). At the pictorial level, this orientation corresponds to mobile viewing: landscape is not organised for one stationary observer but assembled through multiple positions and directions of attention. The resulting image invites the eye to travel among near and far, high and low, concealment and disclosure.

For garden analysis, mobile viewing is translated into sequential circulation. The relevant evidence is not that a garden looks like a scroll from one viewpoint. It is that paths, bridges, corridors, openings, and pavilions produce a temporal succession of visual fields. Guo Xi's account of landscapes that can be viewed, travelled through, and inhabited provides a useful basis for analysing movement and spatial perception; it does not establish direct influence on a particular garden design (Bush & Shih, 1985).

Being and non-being

The Daodejing describes the usefulness of a vessel, room, or wheel through the relation between material form and the empty interval it makes available (Ames & Hall, 2003). The analytical implication is relational: being and non-being are not independent substances, because the function of the formed element depends on an apparently empty space.

In landscape painting, this relation can be specified as void-solid composition. Rendered mountains, trees, and architecture gain legibility through water, mist, sky, and unpainted intervals. Empirical work on pictorial depth cues and virtual-reality studies of garden perception provides a complementary basis for connecting layered visual information with perceived spatial depth (Tai, 2023; Zhu et al., 2022). In garden space, the corresponding operation is the open-built relationship: ponds, courtyards, sky openings, and gaps between structures direct views, separate and connect forms, and increase perceived depth.

Ziran and naturalistic composition

Ziran is used here to describe an appearance of order that seems self-so rather than mechanically imposed (Ames & Hall, 2003). The term does not imply the absence of design. Its analytical value lies in the tension between deliberate construction and an experience of irregular, adaptive formation.

At the pictorial level, ziran corresponds to terrain-like composition: forms are varied, asymmetrical, and connected as if generated through the internal logic of landscape. In gardens, the spatial operation includes irregular rockery, turning routes, compressed passages, cavities, slopes, and sudden openings. Ji Cheng's account of site response and Kuitert's (2015) analysis of borrowed scenery provide garden-theoretical bases for interpreting how designed boundaries and surrounding landscape can be organised as an apparently continuous spatial field (Ji, 1988).

Table 1 Analytical framework for the spatial translation of daoist concepts

Daoist concept	Pictorial logic	Spatial operation	Garden case	Spatial effect
Wandering	Mobile viewing	Sequential circulation	Humble Administrator's Garden	Changing viewpoints
Being and non-being	Void-solid composition	Open-built relationship	Master of the Nets Garden	Spatial extension
Ziran	Terrain-like composition	Irregular rockery and movement	Lion Grove Garden	Naturalistic spatial experience

Concise historical context

The historical background can be stated briefly. During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, landscape became increasingly important as an independent subject of aesthetic and philosophical reflection. Writings such as Zong Bing's Preface to Landscape Painting supplied a vocabulary for viewing landscape as more than physical scenery, while Six Dynasties aesthetic discourse connected artistic form with cosmological and philosophical questions (Bush & Shih, 1985; Cai, 2004).

Tang and Song painting theory developed more specific accounts of composition, distance, and the imagined traversal of landscape. A painting-theoretical text traditionally attributed to Wang Wei and Guo Xi's later writings are relevant here because they describe

ways of organising the viewer's relation to pictorial space. These texts provide analytical categories, not proof that later garden makers followed a direct line of transmission.

By the Ming and Qing periods, literati practices, painting, garden representation, and garden making had become closely interrelated in documented social settings (Clunas, 1996). Ji Cheng's Yuan Ye gives particular attention to site response, views, and arrangement, while later research has clarified the changing meanings of borrowed scenery in Chinese garden discourse (Ji, 1988; Kuitert, 2015; Zhou et al., 2011). This context makes comparison historically plausible while leaving the specific correspondences to be tested through the cases below.

Demonstrative case analyses

Each case follows the same sequence: Daoist concept, pictorial logic, spatial operation, garden evidence, spatial effect, and interpretation. This parallel structure permits comparison without treating the gardens as interchangeable.

Humble administrator's garden

Daoist concept

The relevant concept is wandering, understood as movement that is not governed by a single fixed viewpoint. Its spatial significance lies in openness to changing position and scale rather than in a claim that the garden was designed as a literal illustration of the Zhuangzi.

Pictorial logic

The corresponding pictorial logic is mobile or dispersed viewing. A landscape image can coordinate several visual positions within one compositional field, allowing the viewer's attention to move through successive relations among foreground, middle distance, and distant forms.

Spatial operation

The pictorial logic is translated into sequential circulation. Movement along water edges, across bridges, through covered corridors, toward pavilions, and to elevated viewpoints repeatedly changes the observer's position and the balance among open water, vegetation, architecture, and distant scenery.

Garden evidence

In the Humble Administrator's Garden, water functions as a connective field rather than a single object of frontal viewing. At the water edge, the visitor encounters reflections and low lateral views. A bridge redirects movement and produces oblique views along the surface. Corridors alternately screen and reveal the pond. Pavilions stabilise temporary viewing positions, while elevated points enlarge the field and reorganise previously encountered elements. The sequence water edge, bridge, corridor, pavilion, and elevated viewpoint makes visual change dependent on bodily movement. Space-syntax comparison and a recent visual-perception-oriented three-dimensional data model independently support analysing this garden through connected routes, visibility, and changing perceptual fields (Zhang & Su, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023).

Spatial effect

The principal effects are changing visual fields, a legible spatial sequence, and an experience of depth produced over time. No single position contains the garden as a complete image; coherence emerges through the visitor's accumulation of partial views.

Interpretation

The case supports the interpretation that pictorial multiplicity is translated into temporal spatial experience. Wandering provides the conceptual orientation, mobile viewing specifies the pictorial mechanism, and sequential circulation makes that mechanism observable in space.

Master of the nets garden

Daoist concept

The relevant concept is the relation between being and non-being. The analysis focuses on how material elements acquire spatial function through open intervals, rather than treating emptiness as a symbolic label applied after the fact.

Pictorial logic

The corresponding pictorial logic is void-solid composition. Mountains, trees, and buildings operate as solid forms, while water, mist, sky, and unpainted areas create intervals that separate, connect, and extend those

forms. Void is therefore compositional rather than residual.

Spatial operation

The pictorial logic becomes an open- built relationship. Pond, courtyard, and sky openings alternate with pavilions, rocks, walls, and vegetation. Open space directs attention between built anchors and enables visual continuity across a compact site.

Garden evidence

In the Master of the Nets Garden, the pond establishes a central open field around which pavilions, rockwork, walls, and planting are positioned. From a pavilion, the eye crosses water before meeting vegetation or built edges; a courtyard then contracts the field, while another opening restores a longer view toward sky or water. This open, solid, open sequence does not depend on physical size alone. Reflections increase the apparent continuity of the pond, framed openings select distant fragments, and rocks provide material counterpoints that make the open intervals perceptually active. Lu and Liu's (2023) spatial-experiential analysis of focusing spaces and focused worlds supports the interpretation that garden experience is structured through relations between a viewing position and its perceptual field.



Figure 1 Water-edge viewing and dispersed spatial composition in the Humble Administrator's Garden.
Source: Author (2025).



Figure 2 Compression and opening within a sequential route in the Humble Administrator's Garden.
Source: Author (2025).

Spatial effect

The resulting effects are spatial extension, visual breathing space, and layered depth. The open field prevents built elements from forming a closed cluster, while solid edges give the openness scale, orientation, and rhythm. Quantitative research on depth perception indicates that occlusion, layering, and the arrangement of landscape elements can systematically affect perceived distance in classical Chinese gardens (Zhu et al., 2022).

Interpretation

The case indicates that void is not absence; it actively structures perception. Being and non-being provide the conceptual relation, void-solid composition makes it pictorially specific, and the open-built relationship renders it observable in garden space.

Lion grove garden

Daoist concept

The relevant concept is ziran, understood as an appearance of self-so or unforced formation. The analysis does not classify the rockery as untouched nature. It asks how deliberate construction produces an experience in which spatial order appears terrain-like rather than geometrically imposed.

Pictorial logic

The corresponding pictorial logic is irregular, terrain-like composition. Forms vary in height, contour, density, and interval, and their relations suggest a landscape generated through internal topographic continuity rather than through axial symmetry.

Spatial operation

The pictorial logic is translated into irregular rockery combined with compression, release, and turning movement. Narrow passages restrict the body and the field of vision; cavities interrupt orientation; turns conceal the next segment; slopes alter scale; and sudden openings re-establish wider spatial relations.

Garden evidence

The Lion Grove rockery uses Taihu stone to produce a navigable network of passages, voids, rises, and openings. From within a narrow route, the visitor often sees only a partial rock face or a framed fragment of vegetation. A turn may reveal a cavity, another path, or a sudden opening toward architecture and water. Because the route repeatedly shifts between enclosure and release, the rockery is experienced as terrain with uncertain depth rather than as a single sculptural object viewed from outside. This interpretation is consistent with Ji Cheng's emphasis on adjusting designed landscape to site conditions and on coordinating spatial arrangement with available views (Ji, 1988).

Spatial effect

The spatial effects are exploration, changing scale, and a naturalistic experience of constructed terrain. Perception is repeatedly recalibrated as the route moves between close rock surfaces, cavities, elevated points, and wider openings.

Interpretation

The case supports the interpretation that artificial construction can be organised to produce an appearance of natural spatial formation. Ziran supplies the conceptual problem, terrain-like composition supplies the pictorial logic, and irregular rockery with compression and release supplies the observable spatial operation.

Cross-case comparison

Three mechanisms of spatial translation

The three cases show that the relationship between landscape painting and garden design is not adequately described as visual imitation. In each case, a philosophical category becomes analytically useful only after a pictorial mechanism is specified and translated into a spatial operation. The common process is spatial translation: mobile viewing becomes movement through successive viewpoints; void-solid composition becomes an active relation between open and built elements; and terrain-like composition becomes an irregular route through constructed rockery. Contemporary studies using pictorial depth analysis, isovist measures, spatial syntax, three-dimensional modelling, and virtual reality confirm that changing views and perceived depth can be examined as spatially observable effects rather than treated only as metaphor (Shen & Yu, 2024; Tai, 2023; Zhang & Su, 2025; Zhang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2022).

Philosophical interpretation of spatial translation

Wandering as spatial experience

In the Humble Administrator's Garden, wandering is interpreted through the visitor's changing position. The philosophical implication is located in the refusal of a final, fixed view. Spatial meaning accumulates through movement, revision, and partial disclosure.

Void and openness as spatial structure

In the Master of the Nets Garden, openness is not an empty remainder between objects. Pond, courtyard, and sky make the surrounding pavilions, rocks, walls, and vegetation perceptually legible. The philosophical relation between being and non-being is thus interpreted as a spatial structure with observable perceptual consequences.

Ziran as constructed naturalness

In the Lion Grove Garden, ziran concerns the way construction is organised and encountered. Irregular rock forms, concealed turns, cavities, and changes of scale create an experience of terrain-like formation. The result is constructed naturalness: design remains deliberate, but its spatial order is not presented as rigid or mechanically complete.

Illustrative examples and scope boundaries

Other classical gardens may also illustrate individual mechanisms such as framed viewing, distant viewing, sequential movement, and the coordination of topography, water, and architecture. However, these examples are not used here to verify the three principal correspondences. Research on borrowed scenery further demonstrates that visual relationships in Chinese gardens involve both compositional and bodily dimensions and that the term has changed across historical and modern discourse (Kuitert, 2015; Zhou et al., 2011).



Figure 3 Irregular rockery and architecture in the Lion Grove Garden.
Source: Author (2025).

Table 2 Cross-case comparison of spatial translation mechanisms

Philosophy	Painting	Space
Wandering	Mobile viewing	Sequential movement
Being and non-being	Void-solid composition	Open-built relationship
Ziran	Terrain-like composition	Irregular spatial formation

Conclusion

The study identified three structured relationships. Wandering corresponds to mobile viewing and is translated into sequential movement in the Humble Administrator' s Garden. Being and non- being correspond to void-solid composition and are translated into the open-built relationship in the Master of the Nets Garden. Ziran corresponds to terrain- like composition and is translated into irregular spatial formation in the Lion Grove Garden. Their respective effects are changing views, spatial extension, and a naturalistic experience of constructed terrain.

These findings support the analytical sequence proposed at the outset: Daoist concept, pictorial logic, spatial operation, garden case, and spatial effect. The contribution of this sequence is methodological. It identifies the pictorial level as the mediating mechanism between philosophy and space, thereby replacing broad equivalence among Daoism, painting, and gardens with a set of analytically traceable interpretive correspondences.

The framework cannot prove a direct historical transmission from a Daoist text or painting treatise to the design of a particular garden. Establishing that kind of causation would require evidence such as garden records, historical plans, designer biographies, correspondence, or documented patron intentions. The present study instead establishes an interpretive comparative framework whose claims are limited to conceptual relevance, pictorial specificity, and spatial observability.

Future research can test the framework against dated plans, garden records, documented design decisions, and cases outside Suzhou. It can also compare how the same spatial operation changes across garden scale, period, and patronage. Such work would clarify where interpretive correspondence is historically supported, where it remains a formal analogy, and where additional mechanisms are required.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

As English is not the authors' first language, AI was used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with English language editing, including grammar, clarity, and readability. The tool was not used to generate research data or conduct the research analysis. All AI-assisted text was carefully reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

CRediT author statement

Gu Jinlong: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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