

## Blending with Nature

### Classical Chinese Gardens in the Suzhou Style

Written, directed, produced by Raymond W. Olson  
2003. 53 Minutes. VHS. Color.

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Lion Forest Garden in Suzhou.

Photo by Mark Bothe

**Editor's Note:** Readers who desire more information on classical Chinese gardens are encouraged to go to <http://www.aasianst.org/EAA/nemroff.htm> for an extensive bibliography developed by Lauren Nemroff of the Reed College Department of Art.

Students usually react skeptically—or with puzzlement—when I point out that traditional Chinese scholars sought to be Confucian in the daytime and Daoist in the evening. The idea strikes them as contradictory. After seeing *Blending with Nature*, I expect they will understand more easily what I am saying.

The film will not likely win major awards for production. Its narration tends toward dullness; the photography lacks subtlety; and the pace sometimes is slow. As it moves along, however, it becomes increasingly engaging, flowing fluidly (in Daoist fashion) from garden to garden and poem to poem. At the same time, it is quite carefully structured (Confucian style) and full of the kinds of insights that had me saying, “I think this will work in class: certainly in my introductory East Asian Cultures course, probably in Premodern East Asian history too.”

*Blending with Nature* introduces the scholar-gardens that were so important to China's literati in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911). Taking us through eleven classical gardens, eight of them in Suzhou near Shanghai, it blends poetry, diary quotations, zither music, and commentary by art historians and museum curators to explain both the structures of the gardens and the impact they had on those who used them. Even the gardens' names, we are told, reveal what it was that scholars found so useful in them: Garden of Cultivation, Humble Scholar Garden, Cloud Capped Peak Garden, Garden of Awakening Orchid (Portland, Oregon).

The basic purpose of the scholar-garden—to bring sensitivity into the lives of officials whose daily work threatens to dull their spirits—is explained in several of the Chinese quotations on which the film's producers draw: a 1600s' garden manual's notation that a garden should allow one “to live as a hermit, even in the middle of the marketplace;” the observation of a scholar in 1868 that “if a home has not a garden and an old tree, I see not where the everyday joys of life are to come;” Tang poet Li Bai's description of the garden as place that yields “a heart free of care.”

A central theme of *Blending with Nature* is the remarkable capacity of scholar-gardens for incorporating a wide variety of traditional Chinese intellectual concerns. On the one hand, the garden was a place for visitors to experience China's elite arts: paintings, music, calligraphy, poetry, architecture, and the quiet, misty, beauties of nature. On the other hand, it was meant to symbolize the entire Chinese cosmology, the *yin/yang* blend of activity and passivity that energized the world. If one encapsulated too much nature and too little culture, said Confucius, he would become a savage; if he had too much culture and too little nature, a pedant.

In class, my inclination would be to ask students to identify the elements of Chinese thought and culture they find in the film, without much prior prodding or reading. Or I might prime the discussion by asking them to delineate the Daoist and Confucian ideas, and the way in which they supported, or blended into, each other. Among the features I would expect them to encounter are the following.

*Daoism.* I hope that some will notice the Daoist flow of the film, the way it moves from voice to picture, from music to poetry, from panorama to tiny nook, from Suzhou to Vancouver, with few clear demarcations. The fact that Li Bai is quoted but the Confucian Du Fu is not heightens this sense. So does the structure of the gardens: the avoidance of symmetry; the use of zig-zag walks (“what could be covered in three steps he wants us to take in nine steps”), the appreciation of light rain that “adds to the mystery of nature's mystic beauty,” the surprises provided by lattice windows that let visions of ponds, willows, and mountain-rocks “leak through.” To view Suzhou's gardens and miss their seemingly unstructured grace is unthinkable.

*Confucianism.* Equally dominant but less obvious (and thus more appealing for perceptive students) are the gardens' many Confucian qualities: the careful planning that lies behind the “naturalness,” the scholastic names the creators gave to their gardens, the tendency of scholars to speculate endlessly on what the gardens' elements mean. We see willows symbolizing softness, pomegranates betokening female fertility, banana plants standing for self-education (because early students, having no paper, wrote on their leaves), bamboo representing firmness and softness, loyalty and righteousness. These gardens are nothing if not scholastic—in conception, in execution, in actual experience.

The gardens of this film thus constitute the essence of what a Confucian scholar sought to create: a well thought out, carefully constructed art form that is, in the words of the film, “a bit

reserved, so it always gives you some room for the imagination.” Thus, the sharply upturned eaves, so painstakingly designed, might serve to warn off the evil spirits, to admit light into the interior of a pavilion, or to simply divert the falling rain. And the tall, narrow rock may suggest a mountain, or it may simply be a stunning rock. But to the garden’s scholar, it always stands for something.

The best thing of all about *Blending with Nature* is the ever-growing, cumulative effect that accrues from the endless views of natural microcosms: a pond through an oval window, water flowing along an adobe wall, the moon above a sighing pine, a miniature tree flanked by calligraphy-filled scrolls, the shadows of a bamboo grove, intricate pebble arrangements. These gardens were created by Confucian scholars, artists all, who wanted visitors to experience nature as the mind knows it, and thus to become more sensitive human beings. Students may not come away from this film energized, but they should come away understanding the Confucian-Daoist cosmology with their senses as well as their minds. ■

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## The Sound of the Violin at My Lai

Directed by Tran Van Thuy

Produced by the Central Documentary and Scientific Film Studio, Hanoi

“Best Short,” 1999 Asian Pacific Film Festival, Bangkok  
1998. 32 Minutes. VHS. Color.

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**T**he *Sound of the Violin at My Lai*, winner of “Best Short” at the 1999 Asian Pacific Film Festival in Bangkok, opens with the story of former U.S. marine Mike Boehm, who plays his violin at the site of the massacre as an offering to the spirits of the dead, then stays to work for reconstruction and for the creation of a Vietnamese-American Peace Park. But Vietnamese filmmaker Tran Van Thuy’s documentary is not limited by nationality, nor by the past, though it is shaped by both. It is a story about a village, a story about war, about integrity in the face of atrocity, about rebuilding out of terrible destruction. It is a story made for

Vietnamese audiences that speaks deeply to Americans.

The film moves from past to present, between remembering and transformation. The sepia-toned images that accompany a straightforward narration of events are criss-crossed by bright-colored footage of laughing children at play. Scenes of school children running gaily down a village path once strewn with bodies are cut through by cameos of survivors holding famous newspaper photos of their mothers and sisters who died, reminding grandchildren never to forget. While one man sits by the tablet that marks the death of his entire family, other villagers work the fields and ply the river.

In one of the most touching segments of this very moving film, two women from the village share tea, fruit from their garden, and family photos with two members of a U.S. helicopter crew who intervened to rescue them and ten other people from the carnage. The occasion is the 30th anniversary of the massacre, marked by solemn offerings of incense by Vietnamese and Americans attending the commemoration, and by official ceremonies for the opening of the peace park. “We cannot forget the past,” Boehm says in his remarks, “but we cannot live with anger and hatred either.”

Perhaps it is safe to say that most teachers over the age of fifty remember “My Lai” (the internationally recognized name for a village known locally as Son My) as one of the most publicized dark moments of the war in Vietnam, as a place where U.S. soldiers massacred 504 villagers on the morning of March 16, 1968. Perhaps it is also safe to say that many of our students have never heard of it. How shall we teach them? What shall we teach them?

According to U.S. National Standards for History, students should be able to “evaluate how Vietnamese and Americans experienced the war and how the war continued to affect postwar politics and culture” and “to explore the legacy of the Vietnam War.” This film addresses these issues, but more importantly, will add nuance to how the Vietnam War (commonly referred to by the Vietnamese as the “American War”) is taught in the United States.

According to director Thuy, the key message of the film is that a person, or a nation, must feel shame for its past mistakes and the pain of their own wrongdoing before they can heal the wounds. “It is not easy to build something out of such a disastrous past,” the film concludes. Not easy, but it is what the villagers must do, what the veterans must do, and what much of the world must now find a way to do. This gentle, unflinching film makes an important contribution to that end.

Note: *The Sound of the Violin at My Lai* is being piloted for adoption by 5th grades throughout Vietnam—providing interest-



Image source: [www.videoproject.net](http://www.videoproject.net)