RECORD OF IDLE PLEASURES

I recall that when I was a child, I could open my eyes wide toward the sun and make out the smallest of specks. Whenever I came upon a minuscule object, I would always examine its fine lines and patterns closely, from which I was able to derive pleasure outside of the thing itself.

Summer mosquitoes often swarmed like thunder, and privately I would equate them with flocks of cranes dancing in the sky. And where the heart intended, there were really cranes in the hundreds or thousands. I would look up at them until my neck stiffened.

Or I would keep some mosquitoes inside my white curtain[46] and slowly puff smoke onto them so that they would soar against it. I watched them as if they were white cranes amidst blue clouds, where sure enough like cranes they bugled. At this I would let out exclamations of delight.

And at some jagged spot of a clay wall by a flower-bed covered by weeds, I would often squat down so that I was level with the flower-bed itself and look closely. Weeds became forests, ants and bugs beasts; the little protrusions on the ground were hills and hollow valleys. My spirit wandered therein, contented.

One day, I saw two insects battling in the grass. Just as I was fully absorbed in the spectacle, some behemoth appeared out of nowhere, uprooting hills and tearing down trees along the way—it was a toad. One flick of the tongue and the two bugs were devoured. Being so young and engrossed in the scene as I was, I cried out loud in horror. After I had collected myself, I caught the toad, whipped it several dozen times, and chased it into another yard.

Reflecting back on it when I was older, what really happened in the two insects' fight was one attempting rape, the other resisting.

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46. Mosquito net.

The ancient proverb goes, "Fornication draws death near." Is it the same for insects, too?

I was so easily transfixed by this sort of activity that my egg (in the Wu dialect we call those male parts "eggs") was once sucked on by an earthworm and became so swollen I could not urinate.[47] A duck was caught to suck on it with its mouth held open,[48] but the maid accidentally let go of her hand, and the duck jolted its neck as if about to swallow. I screamed in fright; a laughingstock since.

These were all things that pleased me as a child.

趣

As I got older, I became an anthophile to the point of obsession, and loved pruning potted trees.[49] But it was not until I got to know Zhang Lanbo that I really started honing the craft of pruning branches and nurturing joints, and still later the art of graftage and rockery.

The orchid is the most prized of flowers because of its subdued fragrance and graceful charm. Yet varieties even mildly worthy of catalog are hard to come by.

At the end of his days, Lanbo gifted me a spring orchid with lotus-like petals and a white heart. Its shoulders[50] were even, its heart broad. The stems were slender, petals neat. It belonged in a catalog, and I treasured it like a piece of expensive jade.

When I was working away from home, Yun would water it herself, and its flowers and leaves grew luxuriantly. Yet in less than two years

47. During Shen Fu's time young boys wore crotchless bottoms. Here, the earthworm bite probably occurred while Shen's younger self was squatting down in the grass with his private parts exposed.

48. It was believed that the saliva of ducks could cure the ailment at issue.

49. Potted trees: *Penzai*, or *penjing*, the Chinese traditional practice of growing and shaping miniature trees planted in pots (akin to the Japanese art of bonsai, which developed from *penzai*).

50. The lateral sepals of an orchid.

it wilted and died all of a sudden. I dug up its roots to look, only to find that they were all white as jade, with new growths quite robust.

At first I could not understand this and, with long sighs, resigned to the thought that perhaps such a delicate plant was just beyond my fortune. Only later did I learn that someone who had asked for, but been refused, a cutting killed it by pouring boiling water over it. I swore that from then on I would never grow orchids again.

Next of my favorites was the azalea. Though it did not have much fragrance to speak of, its colors were enduring and pleasing to look at. It was also easy to prune. Except Yun loved each branch and pitied each leaf too much to trim them freely, so it was difficult to give them great form. The same thing was true for all my other potted trees.

Only chrysanthemums, which would bloom every year east of our fence, were the true object of our autumnal passion. I much preferred to pick them and place them in vases rather than raising them in pots—not that I did not like them in pots, but because our gardenless predicament did not permit us to grow them in that manner. The ones from the market, all unkempt like weeds, were not to our liking.

When arranging chrysanthemums, one should have the flowers in odd rather than even numbers. Each vase should have only one color. The mouth of the vase should be broad rather than narrow, so that the flowers can unfurl without constraint.

Whether there be five or seven flowers or a few dozen, the flowers should rise from the mouth of the vase in one straight bunch, neither too loose nor overcrowded, nor should they lean against the mouth of the vase. This is called "keeping the handle firm."

The flowers may stand gracefully straight, or else spread out at different angles. Some should be tall, some should be low, with a few buds mixed in, so as to avoid the uncomely look of a platter. The leaves should not be disorderly, and the stems should not be stiff. If needles are used to keep the stems in place, any extra lengths should be clipped

off so that they are not visible. This is called "keeping the mouth clear."

Depending on the size of the table, three to seven vases should suffice. Any more, one would not be able to make out the contours of each bunch, making them no different than those tawdry chrysanthemum screens sold at the markets.

The stands for the vases can be anywhere between three or four inches to two feet and five or six inches tall. They should vary in height but call to each other, forming a concerted composition. If the stands in the center are uniformly tall and the ones on the sides are low, or if the ones in the back are all tall, the ones in the front all low, the arrangement would look too symmetrical, or what we commonly call "a heap of brilliant refuse." Whether they should be densely arranged or spread out, leaning toward or away from the viewer, is a question left to one's pictorial sensibility.

If instead basins, plates, or bowls are used, one can mix pitch, rosin, elm bark, flour, and oil together and heat the mixture along with rice stalk ash until it congeals into a glue. Press pins onto a copper plate with the pins facing upward, and melt the glue to stick the plate to the basin, plate, or bowl. After the glue has cooled, tie up a bunch of flowers with thin wire and affix them to the pins.

The bunch is better aslant, rather than shooting up straight from the center. Sparse branches and tidy leaves serve best. Clutter is to be avoided. Then add water, and use a little sand to conceal the copper plate, so that the flowers seem to the viewer to have grown directly from the bottom of the bowl.

If flowers or fruits from woody plants are used for arrangement, one must first trim them (for one cannot pick every kind of flower oneself, and those picked by others tend to be unsatisfactory). With a branch in hand, tilt it up and down, turn it back and forth, and see how it looks best. After that's decided, cut off the superfluous twigs for a look that is slim, spare and strange.

Next consider how the stem should enter the vase, with what kind of bend and curve, so that when one puts the branches in, one can avoid the pitfall of having the leaves backwards and the blossoms sideways. If one simply takes any branch that comes to hand and places it upright into a vase, the main stem will look stiff, the branches disorderly, with blossoms sideways and leaves backwards, such that the whole will look devoid of any grace and refinement.

And here's how to curve an otherwise straight stem: make a cut in the middle of it and insert a small piece of rock therein; what was straight now has an inflection. One can also beat a couple of pins to fix it in place lest the stem fall over. Maple leaves and bamboo twigs, or even weeds and brambles, can all be arranged in this manner.

Or, take a green stem of bamboo and pair it with some goji berries, a few blades of thin grass, as well as a couple vines of brambles, and one may derive from it some unearthly delight, as long as the arrangement is appropriate.

趣

When planting new trees and flowers, one might as well plant them askew so as to take advantage of gravity. Let the plants face where they will, and after a year their branches will grow upright again. If all the trees are planted straight up, one will not be able to make use of gravity that way.

As for pruning potted trees, first take those with claw-like roots exposed, cut off excess branches so as to group the rest into three sections from left to right, and let the top grow. Each time the main stem branches off, leave only one branch. Allow seven such branches, or nine, unto the top. It is in poor taste to have canopies directly opposite each other like a pair of shoulders and arms, or to have the joints of the stem swollen like a crane's knees.

The branches must go out in a spiral, rather than simply alternate

left and right, which would give the tree an unattractive look, as if it had a bare chest and exposed back. Nor should the branches grow only from the front and the back. There are also potted trees, so-called "double trunked" or "treble trunked," with two or three upward growths from the same roots. But if the roots of a tree were not claw-shaped, it would look like it was crudely stuck into the dirt and would on that ground be disqualified.

The proper training of a tree, however, takes at least thirty to forty years. In my lifetime I have only seen one man who has succeeded in training several such trees, old Wan Caizhang of my home county. I have also seen, at a merchant's in Yangzhou, one boxwood and one cedar, both gifted by a visitor from Yushan, like pearls before swine—ill-considered, I would say.

Another thing: a tree with its trunk and canopies shaped like a pagoda, or branches curled like earthworms, would look far too trite.

Ornament the pot with flowers and stones to make small picturesque scenes, or grand scenes of enchantment. If, with a cup of green tea, one could easily transport oneself into the scene, that is a sign of an arrangement fit for fine enjoyment in one's private studio.

Once, I planted some narcissus but had no stones from Lingbi to pair them with, so I tried substituting them with pieces of charcoal that looked like stones. One could also take five or seven differently-sized cabbage hearts, of a color white as jade, and plant them in sand in a rectangular pot, again using pieces of charcoal in place of stones to decorate. This arrangement would lend an effect chiaroscuro quite interesting to look at.

Thinking along these lines provides one with infinite possibilities of pleasure, and it's difficult to enumerate them all. For instance, if one chews some calamus seeds along with cold rice broth, and blows the mixture onto bits of charcoal which are then put in a dark and damp place, fine little calamus will grow therein. These can then be easily

moved to a pot or a bowl, fluffy and lovely to look at.

Or, thin both ends of some old lotus seeds and put them into an eggshell, place it under a hen with her other eggs, and take it out when the chicks hatch. Plant the seeds in a small pot using clay from an old swallow's nest, adding in two-tenths of asparagus, and ground well. Water the seeds with river water and light them with morning sun. When the flowers bloom they will be only as big as a wine cup, and the leaves will have shrunk to the size of a bowl, elegant and lovely to look at.

趣

When it comes to the layout of garden pavilions, nested rooms, winding corridors, and the correspondent landscape design with rockery and flowers and greenery, one should try to evoke the small in the large, and the large in the small; to have the real in the illusion, the illusory in the real; to conceal as well as reveal, with recesses now shallow, now deep. Arranging a proper garden is not as simple a matter as creating patterns of tortuosity, nor is the larger, or the fuller, the better—operating under such a misconception would only result in wasted time and energy.

A miniature mountain can be made from a pile of dirt dug out from the ground, to be ornamented with stones and bedecked with plants. One could use plum branches as benches, vines as walls. This way, a mountain is made where once there was naught.

To evoke the small in the large, one could, for instance, populate an open area with easy-growing bamboos, only to screen them off with lush plum trees in front. To evoke the large in the small, make the wall of a narrow garden jagged; green it with vines growing from the corner of the wall and embed it with large rocks, complete with inscriptions. Then, upon opening the window, one would feel as if he was looking out to a cliff, across endless precipices.

To have the real in the illusion means, for instance, at the end of a winding path, where mountains are exhausted and waters reach an end, having a sudden turn reveal an expansive vista; or, similarly, by a dining area situated within a pavilion, having a door open to another courtyard. To have the illusory in the real means, for example, to have only a closed courtyard behind another door, arrayed in bamboo and rockery, creating the semblance of a passage where there is none; or, similarly, having a low railing set up atop a wall to give the illusion of a platform above.

A poor scholar's dwelling often has fewer rooms than is demanded. One might want to draw from the layout seen in the stern of a Taiping boat of my home county, with modifications. In such a layout, cascading steps, with the additional space in the front and back, can be made into three beds, separated by paper-covered boards. Such a construction, layered yet well-partitioned, gives the feeling of a walk down a long road, its narrowness easily overlooked.

When we lived in Yangzhou, Yun and I employed this exact method. Though the house only spanned two beams,[51] our two sleeping quarters, kitchen, and living area were all independent of each other, with space to spare. Yun once remarked laughingly: "This layout is exquisite enough, but the grandeur of a wealthy household it has not!" It was certainly so.

Once, while sweeping our ancestral graves in the mountains, I discovered some stones with patterns like undulating hills. When I returned home, I discussed these finds with Yun:

"We use white putty to set Xuanzhou stones in our stone basins because the colors are uniform. The yellow stones from this mountain are quaint and lovely. But if we also use putty to affix them, the contrast between the yellow and the white will make the work all too visible. What shall we do?"

51. Meaning the house only had two beams. While this is not a strict form of measurement, the number of beams is often referred to in order to indicate the size of a dwelling.

"Pick some inferior stones," Yun replied, "grind them into powder and paste a wet mixture of it onto where the putty is. When it dries, perhaps the colors will blend nicely together."

I did as she suggested, using a rectangular basin from the Yixing kiln to raise a peak, slanted to the left and protruding from the right, with horizontal patterns on the back resembling those from the paintings of Yunlin.[52] The rocks were rugged like cliffs over a river. We filled an empty corner with river mud and planted therein frogbit with many white petals; onto the stones, we grew cypress vines, commonly known as cloud pine. This took quite a few days to complete.

By late fall, the cypress vines had crept over the entire peak, resembling wisteria hanging from a cliff. Their blossoms were a true red. Meanwhile, the white flowers of the frogbit had also breached the surface of the water in full bloom. Letting our spirits wander therein, we felt as if we had ascended the immortal islands of Penglai.

Placing this arrangement under our eaves, Yun and I observed: here we could add a pavilion on the water, and here a thatched gazebo; this spot calls for a six-word inscription that reads, *Between Falling Flowers and Flowing Water*; we could dwell here, fish here, and gaze into the distance here. Our hearts were full with such visions, as if we were really moving into those mountains.

One evening, the cats were fighting over food and fell from the eaves. The whole thing, basin and all, was shattered in a mere instant. I sighed and said, "To think a design as small as ours could offend the Creator!" The two of us could not help but shed tears.

In burning incense in a quiet room lies another cultivated pleasure of the leisurely life. Yun used to steam agarwood, aquilaria, and other fragrant woods in a rice cauldron, and then place them on a brass wire rack above the stove, about an inch from the heart of the fire. The

52. Ni Zan (1301–1374), painter of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, known for the sparse style of his landscape paintings.

scent produced by the slow burn had a subtle charm and was free of any smoke.

The Buddha's hand should not be smelled by a drunken man, or it will spoil easily. It is also bad for the quince to perspire, and if it does, it must be washed with water. Only the *shangjuan*[53] has no such care requirements. The Buddha's hand and the quince both call for special preservation, but I shall go into detail here. Let's just say that whenever we saw someone thoughtlessly take up one of these things to smell them and then just as thoughtlessly putting it down, we would know they did not understand the art of preserving them.

When living at home, the vase on my desk is never empty of flowers. Yun once said to me, "You have made flower arrangements that go with all elements of weather—wind, sun, rain, and dew; they are truly exquisite. Now there is also a school of painting that specializes in insects and grasses—why don't you try emulating that?"

"Insects are too restless to be contained," I replied. "So how should I emulate those paintings?"

"There is a method, but I fear it would set a cruel precedent," Yun responded.

"Try telling me."

She went, "The color of an insect does not change even as it dies. One can find a praying mantis, cicada, butterfly, or the like, kill it with a needle, and use fine thread to tie its neck to the flowers and grasses, arranging its legs to either cling to a stem or rest on a leaf, as though it was still alive. Wouldn't that work?"

I was delighted and did as she suggested. Everyone who saw it had to praise it. I suspect a woman with such perceptive sensibilities is hard to come by these days.

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53. Cold-hardy citrus fruit.

Yun and I also stayed with the Huas in Xishan for a while, during which time Madam Hua had Yun teach her two daughters to read. The courtyard of that country house was spacious and empty. In the summer the sun would feel oppressive, and so Yun taught the family how to make movable flower screens that were quite ingenious.

Each screen had a base that was made from two wooden branches about four or five inches long, fashioned like low benches, with an open space in the center, divided by four horizontal bars approximately a foot apart. Round openings were drilled in the four corners for the installation of bamboo lattices. The screens stood about six or seven feet tall. She then planted some hyacinth beans in sand pots and placed them inside the screens, allowing the vines to climb up the lattices. Two people could easily move the screens.

One can make several more of these screens and place them wherever he pleases, creating the effect of a window shaded by green: sun out, breezes in. The screens can be arranged in a meandering manner, and the plants can be changed at any time, hence the name movable flower screens. With this method, any flowering vines seen in the area can be made use of, a great way to rejoice in the rural way of life.

趣

I had a friend, Lu Banfang, whose given name was Zhang, courtesy name Chunshan. He was a skilled painter of pines and cypresses, and of plums and chrysanthemums. He was also well-versed in cursive script as well as seal carving. I lived in his home, Free and Easy House, for a year and a half.

The house faced east and spanned five beams, with our living quarters occupying the three in the back. Whether it was bright or gloomy, windy, or rainy, we always had a great view looking out to the distant landscapes. In the courtyard, there was an osmanthus tree,

which exuded an enchanting fragrance, and the house had corridors connecting its different wings, all very secluded and quiet.

When we moved in, a servant and a maid, along with their little girl, came as well. The man could make clothes, and the maid could spin. So Yun would embroider, the maid spun, and the man made garments to provide for ourselves.

I have always enjoyed entertaining guests, and whenever we drank together, we would always play drinking games. Yun was adept at cooking up a feast within the constraints of our means. Squash, vegetables, fish, or shrimp, once touched by her, would all take on delightfully surprising flavors. My friends, knowing I was poor, would often contribute some wine money so we could talk the whole day away.

I have always been keen on cleanliness. My space was free of dust and lint but had a relaxed atmosphere, allowing guests to carry themselves freely. Among my visitors was Yang Bufan, given name Changxu, known for his portraits; Yuan Shaoyu, given name Pei, skilled in landscape painting; and Wang Xinglan, given name Yan, adept in landscape painting; Wang Xinglan, given name Yan, whose specialty was flowers and feathers.

All of them loved Free and Easy House for its elegance and would come with their painting supplies. I learned to paint from them, as well as calligraphy, seal carving, from which we made some extra cash that was turned over to Yun, who bought tea and wine for our guests. All day we would talk about poetry and art and nothing more.

There were also the Xia Dan'an and Yi Shan brothers, the Miao Shanyin and Zhi Bai brothers, along with other scholars like Jiang Yunxiang, Lu Juxiang, Zhou Xiaoxia, Guo Xiaoyu, Hua Xingfan, and Zhang Xianhan. All of them came and went like swallows on a beam.

Yun would even sell her hairpins for wine without a second thought, because we could not bear to squander such fine moments and beautiful scenery. Yet now we are all scattered in different places,

like clouds parted by the wind. The woman I loved is gone; jade broken, incense buried. How hard it is to look back! Is this not what they mean by "once a common sight, now a source of grief"?

Free and Easy House had four prohibitions: discussions of official promotions, bureaucratic affairs, or the eight-legged essay style,[54] and gambling on card games or dice. Anyone who violated these rules would pay a fine of five jugs of wine. On the other hand, there were four values we all endorsed: generosity and enthusiasm, romanticism in refinement, a carefree and unrestrained spirit, and tranquility and clarity.

During the long summer days with little to do, we would hold "examinations" among ourselves. Each examination would have eight participants, with each bringing two hundred copper coins.

First, we would draw lots: the one who drew the first lot would be the examiner, seated at the front, while the second would be the recorder, also seated in his assigned place. The others would then be the candidates, each taking a paper slip from the recorder, properly stamped with the recorder's seal. The examiner would give out, as prompts, five heptasyllabic couplets and five pentasyllabic couplets. The candidates were allotted the time it took to burn one incense stick to think and compose their couplets. No discussion was allowed.

Once completed, the candidates would submit their work into a box and take their seat. After all submissions were in, the recorder would open the box, copy the writings onto a booklet, and present them to the examiner, who would review them blind so as to prevent any personal bias.

From the sixteen pairs of couplets, three heptasyllabic ones and three pentasyllabic ones would be selected. The one with the best couplets would be appointed as the next host, while the second would serve as the recorder. Those who did not have any couplets selected

54. The style of essay used in imperial examinations during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

would pay twenty in cash; those who had one selected would pay ten, and anyone exceeding the time limit would pay double the fee. In a single session, the examiner could earn a hundred in "incense fees."

In a day, we could hold as many as ten sessions, collecting some one thousand in cash, a great gain for our wine fund. Only Yun received the "preferred paper" treatment — she had the privilege to think and compose on her own time.

One day, Yang Bufan did a sketch of me and Yun planting flowers in the garden, in vivid likeness. That evening, the moon showed a nice complexion, and the shadow of orchids climbed up our pink wall; quite the serene grace. Xinglan, intoxicated as well as inspired, said, "Bufan can sketch your portraits. And I can paint these flowers' shadows." I laughed and said, "But can you paint them as well as we were sketched?"

Xinglan then took a piece of plain paper and pasted it on to the wall, where he traced the orchids' shadows in ink now dark, now light. We took a proper look at it the next day, and while it was not so much a real painting, the sparse lines of flowers and leaves were indeed enchanting like that moonlit scene. Yun cherished it very much, and we each wrote an inscription on it.

趣

In Suzhou, there are two gardens: the South Garden and the North Garden. As when the rapeseed flowers were in bloom, it became quite a problem that there was no tavern closeby for us to get a leisurely drink. If we brought our own picnic basket, only to toast the flowers with cold wine, that would be no fun at all.[55] Some suggested buying wine from the nearest tavern. Others proposed going for drinks after viewing the flowers. But neither seemed as enjoyable as having warm drinks while surrounded by blossoms. No decision came of our

55. It was customary to drink wine warm.

discussion. Then Yun laughed and said, "Come tomorrow, let each of you contribute a bit of money, and I'll bring the stove and fire." To which everyone laughed and said, "Very well."

After the group dispersed, I asked Yun, "Are you really going to bring everything yourself?"

She replied, "Not quite. I saw a vendor selling wontons in the market, fully equipped with pots and stoves. Why not hire him to come with us? I'll prepare everything beforehand and reheat it on the stove when we get there. This way we can have wine and tea both."

"That would certainly work for wine and dishes, but will we have anything to brew tea with?" I asked.

"I'll bring a clay pot," Yun replied, "and, with the wonton vendor's pot removed, hang the clay pot by an iron spike over the stove. Then we add firewood to brew the tea. Wouldn't that work?"

I had to applaud her cleverness. In the streets there was this wonton vendor by the name Bao. We hired him for a hundred coins, arranging for him to come the next afternoon, and he readily agreed. The next day, when our group of flower viewers arrived, I relayed Yun's idea, which was much admired by all.

After lunch, we all departed together for the South Garden with our mats. We chose a spot under the shade of willows and sat in a circle. We brewed tea first in order. Once done sipping, we warmed the wine and heated up the dishes.

The breeze was gentle in the brilliance of the sun, and the fields looked as if they were covered in gold, with shirts and dresses in blue and red crisscrossing therein, and butterflies and bees flitting about. The sight left us intoxicated without the help of any liquor.

When after a while, the wine had been warmed and dishes ready, we sat down again, indulging fully in the feast. The wonton vendor was quite the agreeable person, and we invited him to drink with us. Those walking by all envied our whimsical idea.

By the end, only empty cups and plates scattered around. All of us were left without a care, sitting or lying down, singing, whistling. As the crimson sun was about to fade, I began to crave porridge. The vendor went to get rice and made some for us, and we all went home with stuffed bellies.

"Did you all have a great excursion today?" Yun asked.

"We certainly would not have enjoyed it as much, had it not been for Madam's greatness!" they replied in unison. Then merrily we parted ways.

趣

A poor scholar's approach to his attire, daily necessities, and utensils should be one of economy but also of elegance. The principle of such economy is to "take things as they are."

For instance, I enjoy light libations and prefer to have only a few dishes. Yun designed a plum blossom dining set for me with six deep dishes of white porcelain, each two inches wide. One would be placed in the center, the other five arranged around it, painted with gray lacquer. The whole thus resembled a plum blossom. Both the base tray and the lid were beveled, and the lid was complete with a handle on top just like a flower stem.

When placed on the table, the set would look like a resting dark plum blossom. Opening the lid would reveal the dishes within the petals, with six compartments all in different colors, perfect for a gathering of two or three close friends, who could take what they liked and refill as needed.

Yun also made a round plate with low edges to hold our cups, chopsticks, and wine jugs, so that dinner could be served anywhere we pleased and be just as easily cleaned up. This is the principle of economy in food.

Yun also made all my caps, collars, and socks. Worn out clothes

were patched from old clothes, but always kept tidy and clean. We wore muted colors so that stains would not be as conspicuous, and the colors were also fit for most occasions, be it at home or in travels. This reflects the economy in clothing.

When we first moved to the Free and Easy House, I found its interior too dark. We thus covered the walls with white paper, and the chambers brightened up instantly. And in the summertime, when the windows were removed, we felt the space looked too empty and exposed.

"There are some old bamboo curtains here. Why don't we use one of those in lieu of a screen?" Yun suggested.

"But how?" I asked.

"We can take several bamboo poles, paint them pitch-black, and crisscross them into a frame, just large enough for there to be still room below to walk through," she replied. "Then we can cut one of those curtains in half, about the height of the table, to hang on the horizontal pole, letting it drape to the ground.

"Then place four shorter bamboo poles vertically in the center and fasten them in place with hemp strings. We can find some black strips of fabric and sew them together to wrap up these poles and the horizontal pole. It would give us some privacy and look quite attractive without costing us much."

This is another application of "take things where they are." Seen this way, the belief of antiquity that "every part of bamboo and wood has its use" indeed has merit.

In the early summer season, when the lotus flowers first started to bloom, they would close at dusk and open again at dawn.

Yun would pack a few tea leaves in a small gauze pouch and place it in the heart of the flower. Upon being retrieved the next morning, she would brew the tea leaves in spring water. The fragrance, thus infused, was without parallel.