

The inheritance and development of Chinese classical garden art in modern landscape architecture: a case study of the Fangta garden design

Abstract

This paper employs the case study methodology, focusing on Shanghai's Fangta Garden, to explore the "old" and "new" in Chinese classical gardens from perspectives such as the garden's design background, layout, issues in inheriting classical gardening traditions, and its core spirit. It further delves into the design philosophy and artistic ideology behind Fangta Garden, transforming its conceptual approach into a referential framework. The aim is to provide insights into how Chinese classical gardens can continue to be inherited and developed in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Chinese classical gardens, innovation through classical heritage, modern parks, Fangta garden, inheritance and development

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Chinese Classical Gardens, as one of the three major landscaping systems in the world, are acclaimed by Western artists as the "Mother of World Gardens." From the construction of the "Jade Terrace" in the Xia Dynasty around 1800 BC to the late Qing Dynasty, classical gardens have experienced fluctuations throughout China's five-thousand-year cultural history, evolving alongside different dynasties. They stand as artistic treasures of Chinese cultural history and vivid reflections of the inner spiritual character of the Chinese nation. By integrating architectural, painting, sculptural, calligraphic, and cultural arts, classical gardens skillfully configure and create with the four core elements—mountains, water, plants, and architecture—intertwining nature and human culture into an organic whole. Unlike Western garden culture, which emphasizes the conquest of nature, traditional Chinese culture prioritizes reverence for nature. The philosophical ideas of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are inscribed to varying degrees within classical gardens, profoundly influencing their design and ideology. Today, studying the art of classical gardens remains an indispensable component in the construction of modern urban landscapes. With ecology playing an increasingly critical role in urban development, the urgent question arises: how to inherit and carry forward classical garden art, integrating it into modern landscape design of the new era without losing its distinctive characteristics? This paper, through the construction and design features of "Fangta Garden," explores points of convergence between classical garden culture and contemporary urban lifestyles. It further investigates how to inherit and develop Chinese classical garden culture and art, blending historical culture with modern spirit—"innovation through classical heritage"—and delves deeply into the role and value of classical gardens in modern society.

Chinese Classical Gardens, recognized as one of the three major landscape systems in the world, are acclaimed by Western artists as the "Mother of World Gardens".¹ From the construction of the "Yu Tai" (Jade Terrace) during the Xia Dynasty around 1800 BC to the late Qing Dynasty, classical gardens have undergone ebbs and flows throughout China's five-thousand-year history, evolving alongside successive dynasties. They stand as artistic treasures within Chinese cultural history and vivid reflections of the inner

spirit and character of the Chinese nation. By integrating various art forms such as architecture, painting, sculpture, calligraphy, and cultural symbolism, classical gardens skillfully configure and creatively combine the four core elements—mountains, water, plants, and structures—to achieve a seamless fusion of nature and human culture, forming an organic whole. Unlike Western garden traditions, which emphasize the conquest of nature, traditional Chinese culture stresses respect and reverence for the natural world. The philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are inscribed to varying degrees within classical gardens, profoundly shaping their design principles and underlying ideology. Today, the study of classical garden art remains an essential component in the construction of modern urban landscapes. With ecological considerations becoming increasingly critical in urban development, there is a pressing need to explore how to inherit and promote classical garden art, integrating it into contemporary landscape design without losing its distinctive characteristics. This paper, through an examination of the construction and design features of "Fangta Garden," seeks to identify points of convergence between classical garden culture and modern urban lifestyles. It further explores methods to inherit and develop Chinese classical garden culture and art, blending historical heritage with a modern spirit—often summarized as "innovation through classical heritage"—and conducts an in-depth inquiry into the role and value of classical gardens in contemporary society.

Background of the Fangta garden project

Introduction to Fangta garden

In 1978, the Shanghai Construction Commission approved an ambitious plan to develop a historical park centered around the Fangta Pagoda. The project was assigned to the renowned architect Feng Jizhong, who was responsible for its overall planning and design. From 1978 to 1986, the project went through an eight-year development process. The first and second phases were completed in 1982, followed by the design and construction of the He Lou Pavilion within the garden.² Covering a total area of 11.52 hectares, the garden is characterized by lush trees and vibrant flowers, providing visitors with a rich aesthetic experience. At the time, the social environment

was complex and fraught with challenges. Against this backdrop, the construction of Fangta Garden held profound significance in pioneering a modern approach to traditional Chinese culture. It not only helped preserve historical relics but also revitalized traditional culture through modern design concepts and techniques. This beautiful park represents a perfect integration of history and modernity, as well as a harmonious blend of culture and nature.² Here, visitors can experience the profound heritage of Chinese traditional culture while appreciating the charm of contemporary garden art. From the outset, Fangta Garden was conceived as an urban park that would protect historical culture while showcasing regional characteristics. This positioning reveals two key objectives: firstly, the construction aimed to preserve historical artifacts—including the Fangta Pagoda and other cultural relics—within a clearly defined area to facilitate management and public visitation; secondly, the park was designed to integrate the expression of local culture with the functional needs of a modern urban park, all while highlighting the historical elegance of the Fangta Pagoda. Hence, the principle of “creating new value through classical heritage” became the core concept of the park—using ancient wisdom to inspire contemporary design.

Layout of Fangta garden

In designing Fangta Garden, Mr. Feng Jizhong emphasized the principle of “eliminating the redundant to preserve the refined” rather than rigidly adhering to traditional classical garden layouts.² Nevertheless, he drew inspiration from the classical concept of appropriate composition, stressing adaptation to the site conditions and rational spatial organization to flexibly structure the garden space.

During the planning phase, primary consideration was given to integrating the Song Dynasty pagoda, Ming Dynasty wall, and Qing Dynasty hall into a coherent visual sequence. Respecting the historical and cultural context of the site, Mr. Feng broke away from conventional axial arrangements and boldly adopted a curved axial relationship, arranging terraces in an orderly yet dynamic manner. This created a clearly structured and well-ordered garden space that skillfully connected the aforementioned historical relics,² establishing a balanced and interlinked spatial relationship across the site. The final layout centers around the Fangta Pagoda, with a bamboo grove to the east and a traditional leisure garden to the west. Two spatial sequences were designed to provide visitors with varied visual experiences while guiding them progressively toward the pagoda.⁴ Mr. Feng Jizhong’s design for Fangta Garden exhibits a strong sense of intentional composition, where new landscape elements encapsulate ancient architectural heritage and culture, resulting in a profound sense of place. Within the garden, visitors can experience both contemporary functional design and a deep historical continuity, showcasing exceptional ingenuity.

Major challenges in inheriting classical Chinese gardens

From the perspective of target users: Classical Chinese gardens were typically small-scale, privately owned spaces primarily serving a limited group of individuals such as royalty, nobles, landowners, officials, and literati. With the exception of imperial gardens, most private gardens were relatively compact in size, meticulously designed, and highly artistic, aiming to imitate nature through refined and abstract techniques. These gardens sought to recreate natural landscapes through human artistry, achieving the ideal of “made by humans, yet as if created by heaven.” However, they largely lacked consideration for public space and collective usage.⁵ In contrast,

modern gardens place greater emphasis on public accessibility and are generally larger in scale, designed to serve the general populace. They incorporate not only aesthetic and artistic values but also ecological, recreational, and social functions.⁶ Classical Chinese gardens were intended mainly for the leisure and contemplation of their owners, often reflecting the creators’ personal sentiments regarding fate, career, and life philosophy, thereby facilitating a spiritual resonance between people and their environment. These gardens emphasized privacy and individuality, being owned by individuals or families, and were tailored to their specific needs and tastes. Modern gardens, on the other hand, prioritize public utility and multifunctionality. They serve not only as spaces for leisure and social activities but also as integral components of urban ecosystems,⁷ contributing to environmental improvement, providing green spaces, and enhancing physical and mental well-being.⁸ Finally, classical Chinese gardens were usually under private ownership, while modern gardens are publicly owned.⁹ This difference in ownership leads to distinct purposes and user groups: privately owned gardens cater to a select few, whereas public gardens are designed to meet the needs of the broader community. The inherent contrast between private and public ownership presents significant challenges in terms of scale and functionality when attempting to inherit and adapt classical garden traditions.

From the perspective of landscape elements: China’s magnificent mountains, rich cultural heritage, and fertile land have endowed its classical gardens with a unique origin: the imitation of pristine nature.¹⁰ This has led Chinese garden art to develop over millennia along a naturalistic trajectory. Classical Chinese gardens typically incorporate mountains and waters, seeking to emulate the natural world and evoke its essence within a limited space. By condensing elements such as hills, water bodies, palaces, cottages, and flora into a miniature landscape, these gardens achieve a harmonious unity between humans and nature—embodying the idea of “seeing the large in the small” while retaining the essential and discarding the superfluous.¹¹ Therefore, the key components of classical gardens often include artificial mountains, water features, plants, and structures, with various stone landscapes serving as particularly important aesthetic elements. Whether through rockery arrangements or specially positioned ornamental stones, garden owners—be they private or imperial—invested considerable resources in acquiring prized stones. A historical example is the “Flower and Rock Expeditions” (花石纲), a special transport system in imperial China dedicated to delivering exotic flowers and rare stones to satisfy the emperor’s tastes. During the reign of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song Dynasty, these expeditions caused widespread suffering—bridges were dismantled, city walls damaged, and common people endured great hardship—all in pursuit of rare rocks for the imperial garden. Among distinctive garden stones, Taihu rocks were especially beloved by scholars and literati. High-quality Taihu rocks were judged by the criteria of “slenderness, permeability, wrinkling, and transparency” (瘦、漏、皱、透).¹² Such stones were rare and required significant time and financial resources to obtain, making them extremely valuable. In modern landscape architecture, however, the large-scale use of such traditional materials is often impractical. Not only are these materials difficult to source, but their cost, construction techniques, and maintenance also pose considerable challenges. Furthermore, compared to classical gardens, modern parks place greater emphasis on functionality. Landscape elements today tend to prioritize practical features such as seating, lighting, and pathways. As a result, while contemporary gardens may lack the refined craftsmanship and detail of classical ones, they are better suited to meet the needs of the general public.

From the perspective of designers: Designers of classical Chinese gardens were often architects, painters, literati, or the garden owners themselves. Although there were renowned gardening masters such as Ji Cheng, there was no independent profession dedicated solely to garden design during that era. Moreover, ancient garden design primarily served officials, scholars, royalty, and nobility, with little consideration given to public accessibility. Restricted by the relatively closed socio-cultural environment of their time, classical garden designs often expressed the personal aspirations and ideals of their owners—whether ambitions for greatness or a desire for reclusive tranquility. In contrast, modern landscape architecture has emerged as an independent and specialized profession. Contemporary designers typically undergo formal training in design, resulting in a stronger sense of professionalism. Furthermore, modern parks function as public spaces intended to serve broad communities rather than exclusive groups. Thus, designers must consider the needs of diverse populations. With evolving understandings of humanity's interdependent relationship with nature, modern parks increasingly incorporate ecological considerations. Landscape architects today must also integrate environmental sustainability and urban planning into their designs.¹³ Frequent international exchanges in the modern era have significantly enriched design theories and expanded the availability of materials. Contemporary designers can draw upon a wide range of design approaches from different countries, styles, and traditions—even employing hybrid designs when conditions permit. Overall, the distinctions between classical Chinese gardens and modern parks in terms of designers are manifested in professionalism, target users, design techniques and styles, urban ecology, and urban planning. These differences reflect how garden design philosophies are shaped by their historical and cultural contexts. Consequently, there is a need for a new design paradigm that can both honor the splendors of classical Chinese gardening and advance the development of modern landscapes imbued with Chinese cultural significance.²

From the perspective of diversity: Classical Chinese gardens possess profound cultural connotations, often reflecting traditional Chinese culture, ancient philosophical ideologies, poetry, painting, and other artistic forms. In contrast, due to greater social openness in modern times, cross-cultural exchanges occur more freely and frequently. As a result, modern parks exhibit richer cultural diversity, incorporating not only traditional elements but also contemporary influences such as ecology, art, technology, and more. In terms of spatial diversity, classical Chinese gardens are characterized by intricate spatial organization. Elements such as terrain, water, plants, and architecture are skillfully employed to create richly layered and visually varied landscapes, aiming to achieve a sense of serenity and depth with “winding paths leading to secluded spots.” On the other hand, modern parks emphasize open and fluid spatial layouts, focusing on interactivity and often utilizing contemporary design techniques to form diverse spatial types—such as open spaces, semi-open spaces, and private areas. These differentiated spaces cater to the needs of various user groups while maintaining connectivity, enhancing both the functional and experiential diversity of the park in terms of leisure, recreation, culture, and ecology. In summary, the differences between classical gardens and modern parks in terms of diversity are mainly reflected in culture, space, function, elements, and style. Along with China's development, many foreign landscaping concepts have been introduced, which have somewhat impacted the tradition of classical Chinese gardening. This has led to instances of blindly following trends—such as the overwhelming influx of European-style landscapes—which often neglect the inheritance and evolution of classical Chinese garden philosophy.

Artistic features of Fangta garden's design: Fangta Garden undoubtedly aligns with modern landscape forms.² In its layout, the garden paths predominantly employ straight lines and arcs, diverging from the winding, serpentine trails typical of classical Chinese gardens. Apart from imperial gardens, many classical scholar or private gardens were estates of individuals with social status or wealth, serving as personal retreats where living spaces were integrated within the landscape—a private domain tailored to the owner. In contrast, modern gardens often feature broad, straight pathways that better suit the scale and function of contemporary public parks, offering openness and accessibility to serve the general populace. In the design of Fangta Garden, Mr. Feng Jizhong adopted a structure balancing “openness” (kuang) and “seclusion” (ao), enabling the garden to accommodate large numbers of visitors while also creating tranquil areas reminiscent of classical gardens. This approach helps distribute visitor flow effectively and enhances the site's appeal. Fangta Garden is not merely a new-style scholar's garden—it is also a public space open and accessible to all.¹⁵ The garden incorporates modern materials and scientific structural techniques in its architecture, while simultaneously expressing cultural traditions rooted in classical Chinese gardens. By seamlessly blending modernity with tradition, Fangta Garden truly realizes the gardening art of “innovation through classical heritage.”

Core philosophy

The central design spirit of Fangta Garden, as conceived by Mr. Feng Jizhong, is “innovation through classical heritage” (与古为新). He believed that within Fangta Garden, future generations should respect tradition—both cultural and historical—while making modifications and constructions that meet modern needs, transforming it into a new and vibrant entity. Throughout the garden, this spirit is prominently embodied and seamlessly circulates, allowing ancient architectural relics and new structures like the He Lou Pavilion, built with modern materials, to blend in naturally. In the garden's design, modern materials such as cement were deliberately avoided. Instead, structures combine steel, wood, bamboo, brick, and stone, extending traditional wooden structural principles in a contemporary form. The design draws from a wide range of influences, incorporating not only elements from classical Chinese gardens but also features inspired by Jiangnan regional landscapes. Woodworking technology has always been highly advanced in China, both historically and in the present. By integrating these techniques with traditional Chinese philosophical culture, Mr. Feng insisted on reforming traditional cultural architecture with a modern developmental perspective, thus creating Fangta Garden. As he expressed: “We advocate a design method that continues cultural context. Innovation does not mean ‘without breaking, there is no establishing’—it should not stem from opposing predecessors or conventions, but rather from real tasks and specific conditions of time and space.” The integration of subject and object within Fangta Garden is key to “innovation through classical heritage.” Feng Jizhong defined this phrase explicitly: “‘为’ means ‘to become,’ not ‘for the sake of.’”¹⁴ From a historical perspective, the Fang Pagoda is the subject of the garden—any contemporary structure added beside it is an object. Yet from a visitor's perspective, the entire park becomes the object. Over time, these objects of the present may gradually merge into the subject, becoming part of the enduring entity.

Key features within the garden

The Fangta Pagoda: The Fangta Pagoda, dating back to the Song Dynasty, serves as the focal point of the entire garden. It is emphasized throughout the design so that visitors can glimpse the pagoda from virtually every vantage point. As the central theme of the garden, the

pagoda establishes the Song Dynasty as the historical and stylistic foundation of the entire space. The garden's topography and layout are intentionally modified to revolve around the pagoda, eschewing excessive ornamentation to maintain a clean and historically resonant atmosphere.

The lake: In Fangta Garden, the presence of water is given importance comparable to that of the pagoda. Classical Chinese gardens have always emphasized the harmony between mountains and waters, with water regarded as a vital component—often referred to as the “lifeblood” of the garden. The use of water bodies enhances the dynamism and vitality of the landscape, making the garden more lively, visually rich, and dynam Cheng, L. Innovative Application of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements in Modern Landscape Design [J]. Urban Construction Theory Research (Electronic Edition), 2023, (08): 170-172. DOI: 10.19569/j.cnki.cn119313/tu.202308056.f the lake's surface, and the reflections in the water collectively create a sense of rhythmic life, inviting visitors to experience the pulsating energy of nature.

The plaza: The plaza within the garden was planned according to functional and visual requirements. Since the Fang Pagoda is positioned as the central feature of the entire garden, the plaza needed to be “open and unobstructed” to emphasize the pagoda's significance and towering presence. The ground surface of the plaza, along with the water bodies and lawns, was designed to provide openness while incorporating variations in space, preventing a monotonous landscape that might dull the visitor's experience. An expansive plaza allows the spatial scale of the garden to harmonize with the pagoda, offering visitors a sense of clarity and order as they look around. Mr. Feng emphasized in his design that tree planting should not compromise the open character of the plaza, yet the space should not be so bare as to lack shaded resting areas. Therefore, native street trees were selected—species with spreading canopies that provide ample shade—while understory shrubs were sparingly used to maintain visual openness and spatial flow. The trees were arranged in a naturalistic manner with variations in size and distribution, avoiding rigid layouts. Additionally, the planting scheme accommodates fire safety requirements, ensuring both aesthetic and practical functions are met.

The sunken path (堦道): The Sunken Path (堦道) serves as a masterful touch in Fangta Garden, drawing inspiration from classical Chinese garden design techniques. It immerses visitors in a uniquely serene and timeless atmosphere. Upon emerging from the path and ascending to the platform of the Tianhou Palace Hall, however, one encounters a dramatically different visual experience. From the elevated platform of the main hall, the view opens up expansively, offering sweeping vistas of the garden's plaza and the Fang Pagoda in the distance. This sophisticated spatial transition vividly reflects Mr. Feng Jizhong's intentional use of “openness” (kuang) and “seclusion” (ao) within the garden's composition—creating a dynamic and thoughtfully layered journey between enclosed intimacy and sudden revelation.

He lou pavilion (何陋轩): The name “He Lou Pavilion” draws inspiration from the famous essay *Inscription on a Humble Home* (《陋室铭》) by the Tang Dynasty poet Liu Yuxi, which includes the lines: “Nanyang has Zhuge Liang's humble lodge, Western Shu has Yang Ziyun's modest pavilion. Confucius once said: ‘What simplicity is there to despise?’” During the design of Fangta Garden, budget constraints posed a significant challenge. The key question was how to realize the design vision while minimizing costs. Material expenses were a primary concern. In response, Mr. Feng Jizhong employed low-cost materials such as straw and bamboo and simplified construction techniques. The most expensive element used in the entire structure

was custom-made bricks. Despite these economical choices, the design was executed with great care and intentionality. He Lou Pavilion masterfully conveys a sense of transition through both time and space. Its form breaks away from traditional symmetrical layouts, incorporating dynamic angles, lines, and openings. The interplay of light and shadow within the structure changes constantly over time, creating an ever-shifting experience. Within the pavilion, space and time seem to flow together in continuous motion. Although humble in materials, the pavilion truly embodies the spirit of “What simplicity is there to despise?” It brilliantly expresses the concept of “kinetic space” within Fangta Garden—not as a theoretical abstraction confined to paper, but as a tangible design statement that celebrates simplicity and unadorned authenticity.

The north gate: The use of steel structure in the design of Fangta Garden coincided with the rising popularity of this modern material. Mr. Feng Jizhong envisioned employing contemporary materials in its construction while capturing the essence of a Song Dynasty-style gate—a bold and innovative attempt. Through careful study of the charm and character of ancient Chinese architecture, the design of the North Gate incorporates a roof inspired by traditional vernacular shed construction techniques. At the same time, steel columns were used to highlight the modern aesthetic of new materials and technologies, breaking away from strict ancient conventions. Mr. Feng integrated the principle of “innovation through classical heritage” (与古为新) into the design of the North Gate, reflecting his firm opposition to mere soulless replication of historical architecture in contemporary design. Instead, he advocated for a thoughtful reinterpretation that respects tradition while embracing modernity.

Inheritance and development of traditional art in Fangta garden: Fangta Garden represents Mr. Feng Jizhong's exploration of how to inherit and develop traditional Chinese garden art in the modern era. The design draws on characteristics of gardening art from both ancient and contemporary, Eastern and Western traditions, resulting in a work that embodies the essence of classical Chinese gardens while meeting the demands of the present time. The garden exemplifies the spirit of “innovation through classical heritage” (与古为新), interpreting traditional elements with creativity and insight. As Mr. Feng stated in discussing the planning of Fangta Garden: “‘为’ means ‘to become,’ not ‘for the sake of.’ Pursuing newness for its own sake is misguided. It should occur naturally—this is what ‘innovation through classical heritage’ implies: contemporary and ancient elements can come together to form something new.” The openness, freedom, and pursuit of natural harmony in Fangta Garden reflect the ethos of the Song Dynasty, while its spacious and minimalist aesthetic conveys a modern sensibility, unifying traditional and contemporary formal languages. Mr. Feng provided an exemplary model for reconciling tradition and modernity. Fangta Garden demonstrates a creative approach to modern park design rooted in the idea of “innovation through classical heritage.” Integrating contemporary architecture within its environmental and historical context allows it to potentially become a new timeless masterpiece. While the newly designed Fangta Garden cannot provide richer historical information than the ancient Song Dynasty pagoda, structures like the He Lou Pavilion—built with modern materials—can evoke a deeper and more lasting empathy through innovative interpretations of older cultural traditions, even surpassing the historical resonance of the ancient Xing Sheng Jiao Temple Pagoda.

Conclusion

China's current urban development is transitioning from a phase of rapid economic growth to one of balanced economic and social

coordination. In the face of increasingly dominant foreign landscaping concepts, a critical challenge facing contemporary landscape designers is how to inherit and further develop China's millennia-old garden culture. Mr. Feng Jizhong's design of Fangta Garden exemplifies this effort. Both in spatial organization and layout, the garden revolves around a "classical essence," while also embodying what may be termed "kinetic space".² With a profound understanding of both Chinese and Western cultural and intellectual traditions, Mr. Feng integrated these influences, offering a clear vision of how tradition can merge with modern spatial design. By inheriting the spirit of classical gardens while incorporating new cultural elements, traditional culture can gain renewed vitality within modern landscapes. Returning to the theme of "old and new" also means addressing how designers deeply attuned to modern sensibilities can inherit the gardening legacy of their predecessors—ultimately fostering a distinctly Chinese form of landscape architecture rooted in its native soil.

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None

Conflicts of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflicts of interest.

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