

Research on issues related to ancient Chinese garden culture

Abstract

A unique garden, apart from the decoration of plants and architecture, its true essence is like a microcosm of traditional Chinese culture, containing poetic and picturesque elements that make people intoxicated. Chinese classical gardens are a unique secular culture in ancient Chinese culture, and people like to describe their beauty as “poetic and picturesque”. This is based on their unique political background and cultural foundation, and is closely related to traditional Chinese literature and painting. Based on the origin of ancient Chinese garden culture, this article analyzes the cultural connotations of ancient Chinese gardens, understands the cultural philosophy of ancient Chinese garden design, explores the development trends of modern gardens in the future, and promotes the forward development of modern garden construction in today’s modern society.

Keywords: ancient garden culture, artistic charm, cultural connotation, cultural philosophy, development trend

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Introduction

Chinese classical gardens, as a unique cultural phenomenon in ancient China, boast a long history and profound cultural significance. With their early origins, they evolved by drawing from various other art forms throughout human societal development, eventually growing into a distinctive artistic genre. These gardens were meticulously designed by their creators to organically integrate elements such as landscapes, plants, and architecture, resulting in artistic, freehand natural scenes that are both inspired by and transcend nature. Through thoughtful arrangement, artificial beauty and natural beauty are skillfully interwoven, forming a novel and harmonious aesthetic unity.¹ Additionally, these gardens emphasize self-cultivation and the convergence of natural scenery with human thought. Classical garden culture is also closely connected to ancient Chinese literature and painting.² Many literati and scholars regarded gardens as spaces for poetic expression, using the scenery to praise nature and convey emotions. This tradition of integrating literary art into garden design has made gardens not only an art form but also a source of inspiration for writers and artists. Furthermore, garden culture is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese philosophy and religious thought. Designs often incorporate Daoist concepts of nature, Confucian ideals of benevolence and righteousness, as well as Buddhist notions of transcendence. Gardens are seen as symbolic representations, reflecting through their layout, plant selection, and architectural design people’s reflections and insights into life, the universe, and human existence.

The origin of ancient Chinese garden culture

The earliest form of Chinese gardens, known as “You” (enclosed hunting grounds), initially served as recreational spaces for royalty. During this early period, however, they held limited practical value. Over time, by the Zhou Dynasty, garden development began to be documented in historical records and started to take on more systematic and organized characteristics. Emperors gradually recognized gardens not merely as places of leisure, but as important symbols of civilization and power, thereby promoting the further evolution of garden art. From the Han Dynasty onward, these spaces came to be known as “Yuan” (imperial parks), evolving into royal palace gardens that served as retreats and administrative centers. In

addition to providing leisure venues for the emperor, these gardens also hosted court ceremonies and handled state affairs. It was during this period that garden design achieved stable development. A notable example is the famous Shanglin Yuan, which was constructed by Emperor Wu of Han on the site of a former Qin Dynasty park.³

After the Sui and Tang dynasties, a significant number of literati and painters began to participate in garden creation, blending scenic beauty with artistic composition. This marked a transition from natural landscape gardens to the more expressive “freehand landscape garden” style. By the Tang Dynasty, with social and economic stability, garden artistry had become highly sophisticated. The design of imperial gardens grew increasingly refined, particularly through the skilled application of stone carving, resulting in exquisitely ornate palace structures. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese garden art reached its peak, showcasing remarkable artistic achievements. Social stability and economic prosperity provided favorable conditions for the construction of large-scale free-style natural gardens, such as Yuanming Yuan, the Chengde Mountain Resort, and Changchun Yuan. These gardens flourished as symbols of wealth and cultural vitality. In this era, peace and prosperity afforded the nobility and royalty ample resources and time to demonstrate their strength in art and culture. These gardens were not only summer retreats for the imperial court but also perfect integrations of culture, art, and nature, reflecting the highly developed civilization of the time. Each era’s gardens encapsulate the social concepts and local customs of their period.⁴ The ultimate and highest goal of Chinese garden art is to pursue the spiritual essence of nature, striving to achieve a state where “though made by human hands, they appear as if created by heaven.”

The cultural connotation of ancient Chinese gardens

In his garden art monograph “Yuanye” in the late Ming Dynasty, Ji Cheng summarized the layout of classical gardens, which imitates nature, as “although created by humans, it seems to bloom from heaven”. The arrangement of mountains, rocks, grass, and trees in gardens cannot violate natural laws and needs to be reasonable. However, it is not necessary to simply imitate nature and reproduce its original appearance, but to express human understanding of nature and express human thoughts and emotions.¹ Pavilions, towers,

bridges, and flowing water within a garden are not only functional structures but also carriers of culture. These elements are often rich in symbolic meaning, reflecting the owner's cultural cultivation, taste, and aesthetic pursuits. The cultural connotations of classical Chinese gardens are embodied in the following aspects:

Blending scene with emotion in garden landscaping

The cultural essence of classical Chinese gardens is reflected in a distinctive understanding of nature. Their design emphasizes the artistic simulation of natural landscapes, skillfully integrating elements such as mountains, water, lakes, and plants through deliberate arrangement to create a miniature version of natural beauty. This concept—"where there is landscape, there is a garden; where there is a garden, there is landscape"—mirrors the Chinese reverence for and harmony with nature. Elements like rocks, ponds, flowers, and trees are meticulously selected and positioned, infusing the entire garden with poetic charm and presenting a picture of Zen-like serenity. Without the lyrical and pictorial qualities drawn from literature, a garden's flora, pavilions, and towers would lack soul. It is only when the artistic conception of poetry and painting is embodied in every rock, plant, and tree that scene and emotion can merge. This allows the garden to transcend mere imitation of nature and become an art form that reflects social life and human sentiment. For example, in the Loquat Garden of the Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou, viewing through a moon gate reveals a scene of layered and enchanting beauty, evoking the serene and profound mood expressed by Ouyang Xiu in his poem *Butterflies in Love with Flowers*: "How deep, how deep, the courtyard seems to be? " Through meticulous design and layout, this garden landscape conveys a tranquil and introspective atmosphere, as if transporting visitors into a poetic world described in classical literature. Here, one may sense the quiet passage of time and the lyrical beauty of blooming and fading flowers—a vivid illustration of the profound fusion between nature and literary art, offering an experience rich in cultural resonance and poetic charm.

The use of literary elements such as scenic names and poetry to evoke garden themes

Poetic compositions not only underscore the central themes of a garden as a whole but also serve as evocative markers of mood and meaning within specific sections.⁵ A notable example is the "Orioles Singing in the Willows" scene at West Lake. Named for the willow-shaded paths and the chorus of orioles that inhabit them, this area comes alive in early spring with countless swaying willow branches resembling rippling green waves, while the birdsong adds a layer of auditory charm—a name that perfectly captures the essence of the scene.¹

Another example is the "Hall of Distant Fragrance" in Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden. The hall opens to a spacious northern platform overlooking a clear, expansive pond. In summer, the pond is covered with luxuriant lotus leaves, and the breeze carries the blossoms' delicate scent from afar. The name is drawn from Zhou Dunyi's essay *On Loving the Lotus*: "Through its hollow interior and straight outer form, untangled by vines or branches, its fragrance drifts afar, all the more pure and graceful". Similarly, the "Pavilion of Lingering Listening" in the same garden takes its name from a poignant line by Li Shangyin: "Though autumn shades won't lift, frost now flies; I keep these withered lotuses to hear the rain. "The name not only signals the autumn season and the withering of lotus leaves but also evokes the image of appreciating rain falling on spent blossoms—a scene rich in poetic melancholy.

Such examples abound throughout Chinese classical gardens. The profound ideas contained in these literary references captivate the mind, serving not only as integral components of the garden's physical design but also as vivid manifestations of its cultural and artistic spirit. It is evident that the pursuit of Chinese garden art extends far beyond mere imitation of nature. Rather, it strives to create a realm where poetry and painting come to life, awakening in visitors a deeper perception of beauty and meaning.

Direct integration of literary and artistic techniques in garden design

First, in the composition of a garden, the arrangement of scenic elements is never arbitrary or aimless. Instead, it is carefully orchestrated to enhance the expressive power of the garden as an artistic medium. For instance, pathways are seldom laid out in straight lines. More often, they curve rhythmically, unfolding spaces gradually and creating a sense of progression. This deliberate design enriches the visitor's experience, eliminating monotony and inviting deeper engagement, while contributing to the overall harmony of the landscape. Second, gardens frequently employ symbolism and allusion, using physical elements to evoke emotions and ideas. Willow branches may symbolize feminine grace, blooming flowers may represent beauty, and pine or cypress trees often stand for resilience and moral integrity. Through such associations, designers imbue the garden with personal sentiment and cultural meaning, allowing viewers to connect emotionally and intellectually with the scenery. By incorporating these rich artistic and literary devices, classical gardens transcend the physical limitations of space and material. Visitors are not only able to appreciate the visual beauty but also perceive the designer's intent, evoking a poetic and reflective experience that mirrors the subtleties of literature and painting.¹

The cultural philosophy of ancient Chinese landscape design

Dao emulating nature: As Laozi proclaimed, "Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature." This principle of "the Dao emulating nature" has been preserved as a foundational concept in classical garden design, giving rise to the artistic ideal where landscapes, "though made by human hands, appear as if created by heaven." Guided by this philosophy, garden design does not pursue mere imitation of nature. Instead, it seeks to express the essence of natural beauty through refined abstraction. This approach is vividly reflected in the treatment of plants: while they initially serve to create green spaces, their aesthetic role in Chinese gardens is elevated to a pictorial level. Designers pay close attention to the innate "character" of each plant, prioritizing its natural form and posture over mere floral color.

Typically, species that are locally adaptable, fast-growing, and require minimal maintenance are selected—but they must also possess a grace suitable for composition, as if taken from a landscape painting. The entire garden functions like a compact ecosystem: flowing water nourishes plants and trees, while fallen leaves return to enrich the earth. This cyclical process reflects a natural yet orderly ecological chain, where the growth and transformation of plants together create a harmonious and pleasing spatial environment.⁶

The beauty of harmony: In garden design, the pursuit of harmony extends from the smallest details—such as a single stone or plant—to the overall spatial environment.⁶ Classical Chinese gardens exemplify this beauty of harmony through their distinctive design philosophy and architectural style, which integrates not only nature

and human culture but also spatial arrangement, architectural artistry, and emotional expression. First, harmony is sought in spatial layout. Through elements such as small bridges, winding paths, and gray bricks paired with green tiles, gardens are divided and organized in a rational manner to create a tranquil and comfortable atmosphere. Scenes from different areas reflect and enhance one another, forming a cohesive spatial harmony that allows visitors to experience a sense of natural flow and uninhibited beauty as they wander through. Second, harmony is embodied in architectural artistry. The form, materials, and colors of structures are carefully coordinated to present a consistent architectural style throughout the garden. This architectural harmony reflects the owner's artistic taste and aspiration for a balanced life. Moreover, harmony between nature and human culture is expressed through the selection and arrangement of plants. The garden's composition organically integrates various flowers, grasses, and trees. This results in a stratified landscape with seasonal interest from flowering and fruiting, supported by a persistent layer of evergreen greenery. This demonstrates not only a reverence for nature but also a philosophy of harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. In the garden, plants are not merely decorative—they embody ecological balance and sustainable vitality. Finally, emotional expression constitutes an essential aspect of the garden's harmonious beauty. Through the arrangement of scenic spots and the choice of elements, the design conveys the owner's understanding of life, emotion, and art. In this way, the garden becomes a medium for personal and cultural expression, blending inner sentiment with outer scenery in a seamless, harmonious unity.

The poetic and pictorial conception: Known as “a garden of landscapes, a landscape within a garden,” the classical Chinese garden embodies a design philosophy deeply influenced by traditional Chinese literature and art, presenting an aesthetic richness akin to poetry and painting. The beauty of such a garden resembles an exquisitely composed landscape scroll, where poetic sentiment and pictorial artistry merge seamlessly. Garden walls often serve as blank canvases, while various window frames, doorways, pavilions, corridor openings, or even casual architectural structures act as picture frames. Each enclosed scene forms a lyrical and visually captivating composition, reflecting the Chinese worldview that harmonizes nature and artistic expression. Strolling through the garden, one encounters ever-changing views—each step offers a new inspiration, as if every scene were conceived for poetry. Large gardens are typically divided into multiple scenic zones following the principle that “large spaces are divided, small spaces gathered.” Each zone is designed around a distinct theme. For example, mountains and ponds within the garden symbolize reclusion and a life of lofty ideals, away from worldly concerns. Plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums represent noble character and are employed as metaphors for the refined “gentleman.” Lotus flowers rising from muddy waters evoke purity and moral integrity, suggesting a person's ability to remain unstained by their surroundings.

This poetic and pictorial conception not only enriches the garden's artistic depth but also offers visitors a transcendent, almost ethereal experience—as if wandering through an immortal realm beyond the mundane world.

The charm of ancient Chinese garden art

The ancient saying, “The benevolent find joy in mountains, the wise delight in waters,” reflects the deep reverence and affection that Chinese literati have long held for natural landscapes. In garden design, this evolved into the principle that “landscape and garden are one.” Designers employed borrowed scenery and artificial construction

to recreate the essence of nature within a limited space, producing layered vistas that blend the tangible with the intangible. Classical Chinese gardens developed largely along the trajectory of painting, with artistic theories of landscape painting playing a foundational role in shaping garden design.¹ Just as landscape painting dominated Chinese visual art, artificial mountains and waterways became central to the garden—allowing literati to immerse themselves in a curated natural environment, thereby expressing their longing for a reclusive life beyond officialdom.⁷ In ancient times, the unpredictability of bureaucratic life—with its sudden rises and falls—fostered a shared philosophy among scholar-officials. To find solace and stability amid political uncertainty, many chose to build and retreat into private gardens. These spaces served not only as sources of pleasure and relaxation but also as sanctuaries—a prudent preparation for eventual retirement. Within these carefully composed environments, they could appreciate natural beauty, express personal emotions, and display literary refinement. Thus, gardens became cultural havens where officials sought spiritual comfort and intellectual exchange, away from the complexities of public life.

Another captivating aspect of Chinese garden art is the use of artificial rockeries—a practice so passionate and refined that it finds no parallel in garden traditions elsewhere in the world. While rock arrangements and grottoes can be found in Western gardens, and stone mountains or “scattered stones” are present in Japanese gardens, the stones used in these traditions are typically not water-worn, setting them apart from the distinctive style of Chinese rockeries. Chinese artificial mountains, by contrast, are often composed of stones sculpted by natural water erosion over time. These are commonly referred to as “Taihu rocks,” named after Lake Tai, where such stones were traditionally sourced. Prized for their unique forms, intricate textures, and porous surfaces, these rocks have become an indispensable element in Chinese gardens. They are skillfully arranged to imitate a variety of natural landscapes—peaks, shores, cliffs, and grottoes—and have long been admired by literati and artists. They captivate us as much by their extraordinary forms as by their symbolic depth. In the eyes of Chinese scholars, rocks represent durability, integrity, and constancy—attributes often elusive in human life. As such, these rockeries serve not merely as decorative features, but as embodiments of moral ideals and timeless natural forces.⁷

Future development trends in modern landscape architecture

Modern landscaping techniques transfer the beauty of natural landscapes and flowers to specific spaces through clever overall layout and plant combinations. Although ancient garden techniques were already very mature, with the continuous development of society and the times, the demand for art has gradually increased, no longer just satisfied with appearance, but more focused on reflecting connotation. Firstly, from the perspective of horizontal social structure, during the equally mature Ming and Qing dynasties, royal gardens demonstrated power and order with their grand scale and precise craftsmanship. Meanwhile, the flourishing Jiangnan literati gardens transformed the gardens into personal spiritual residences through the layout of ‘heaven and earth in a pot’, symbolic techniques of bamboo symbolizing nodes and stone symbolizing mountains. This clearly indicates that it is the cultural needs of the social class (especially the literati class) that endow gardens with a connotation beyond form. Secondly, from the perspective of vertical technological evolution, the art of mountain stacking has evolved from the fantasy landscape of simulating immortal mountains in the Han and Tang dynasties to the pursuit of painting and philosophical abstraction of ‘within

reach of mountains and forests' in the Song and Ming dynasties. Its driving force is the constantly deepening aesthetic and philosophical thoughts of literati. In the end, Ji Cheng proposed the aesthetic ideal of 'Wan Zi Tian Kai' in 'Yuan Ye', which is not a technical guide, but a philosophical manifesto, marking that the pursuit of connotation has become the conscious core theory of garden art.

In modern garden design, through technological means and more precise planning, more layered and deep garden spaces are created, which not only satisfy aesthetic enjoyment but also reflect deeper cultural, historical, or emotional connotations.

Gardens will develop into multifunctional integrated arts: An ideal garden is a product of the perfect fusion of art and science. Gardens not only improve the natural environment and purify the air, but also provide a place for people to relax and have fun, and give people a beautiful aesthetic experience. In today's urban environment with towering skyscrapers, building gardens cannot be limited to traditional concepts. Integrating modern gardens with urban life requires fusing contemporary architectural techniques with strategic landscape and plant design.

Gardens will develop into an organic combination of cities and gardens: Traditional garden construction is usually limited to embellishing and beautifying open spaces, while modern garden construction requires deeper consideration and scientific planning and construction based on the ecological environment of the entire city. The ultimate goal of modern gardens is to form a mutually permeating and complementary relationship in the city, so that the city not only has the beauty of gardens, but also makes gardens a part of the city, achieving the integration of urban life and natural environment. An in-depth analysis and scientific planning should be conducted based on the city's overall ecological environment.

Gardens will develop into a harmonious unity between humans and nature: The human living environment includes multiple systems, and buildings may appear cold, while gardens are full of human touch. Although gardens are artificially created, they are deeply rooted in nature, not only surpassing the environment provided by nature itself for humans, but also maintaining the unique charm of nature itself. At its core, garden creation is a dynamic interplay between human intention and natural processes. The pursuit of modern gardens lies in finding a point of convergence between humans and nature, creating a place where humans and nature coexist harmoniously and blend with each other, in order to achieve the realm of harmony between man and nature.

Landscape architecture will develop into efficient collaboration of multiple technologies: So far, China's unique garden art has had a profound impact on a global scale. In the future, the importance of gardens will gradually be recognized by more people, especially in the fields of humanities and engineering technology. The integration of the Internet with the garden industry, capitalizing on the latter's timeliness and wide influence, injects new vitality into this traditional art. Although traditional gardens have a history of thousands of years, modern garden art has just begun to attract people's attention. With the continuous improvement of Internet technology and electronic technology, we can combine modern technology and garden construction more closely to make the garden construction concept more advanced. Based on the particularity of the industry, industry development strategies can be tailored to local conditions to create a more suitable atmosphere for the development of landscape art. In this way, we can promote garden art towards a more advanced and innovative direction.

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None

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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