

Naturalistic, Harmonious, and Emotional: An Aesthetic Study of Plants of Chinese Gardens in the Qing Dynasty

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The Qing Dynasty was the mature period of traditional Chinese gardens, and the construction of royal gardens reached its peak. Using the method of image and text analysis, the landscape features of different seasons in the Chinese gardens were probed, the layout of its spatial elements and the method of plant landscaping was analyzed, and the artistic characteristics of the gardens in the Qing Dynasty was studied. The aesthetic conception of the gardens have been discussed from the following aspects, the integration of time and space, the harmonious relationship between the garden elements and the fusion of scenery and feelings.

Keywords: landscape aesthetics, traditional Chinese gardens, planting methods, palace paintings

Introduction

Chinese garden is a combination of natural and artistic aesthetics, taking advantages of traditional Chinese poetry and painting, with the pleasure of appreciation of mountains and waters, pavilions, and plants. Through the using of the natural landscape, or artificial processing, combined with plant cultivation, architectural layout and animal landscape, traditional Chinese garden created a living environment with aesthetic value in a certain area (Tang, 2017). The Qing Dynasty was the mature period of traditional Chinese gardens and the construction of which reached its peak.

Influenced by the natural geographical environment, folk custom, traditional thoughts, and other factors, the aesthetics of landscape planting in Chinese gardens emphasize “emotion” (qing), that is, the cultural connotation of planting with the spirit. Wang Xin’s (2005) doctoral dissertation studied the cultural background, designing concepts of traditional Chinese garden plants. In a word, many anthropomorphic plants symbolize the lofty ideals of people, expressing the concept of pursuing passion and friendship, not only having profound meaning but also achieving the realm of harmony between nature and man.

Some scholars paid attention to the interactive relationship between scholars and plants (Métailié, 1998), while others studied plants disposition and aesthetic principles in the painting theories (Tang & Gao, 2010). Chinese painting takes natural landscape as its theme, which has a subtle influence on the landscape design and

Acknowledgements: this paper is sponsored by The National Natural Science Foundation of China (51978272); Key Projects of Guangzhou Science and Technology Plan (201804020017).

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plant configuration. Moreover, the combination of landscape design and painting, showing seasonal variation features, is full of artistic expression of nature spirit. Cong Yipeng and Zhao Di (1998) analyzed the plant artistic conception of Gaichun Garden during the Qingyi Garden period from the aspects of seasons, religious implication, literati interest, and explored Qianlong's aesthetic taste of planting. Moreover, the aesthetic of plants in *Yuan Ye* was studied by Hu Luyao, who advocated the planting principles of being appropriate, valuing harmonious, seeking change and showing the environment (Hu & Zheng, 2018). From the paintings, garden records, poems, and other essays it is not difficult to see that planting of the garden has a distinctive oriental aesthetic taste in the appreciation of grace and virtue. Using image analysis techniques, literature review, and logical analysis, this article examined the landscape characteristics of different seasons, and the theory of planting design, combined with traditional garden culture, was explored by pointing to the associated theoretical works of classical gardens. In sum, the plant aesthetic characteristics of the traditional gardens were discussed as follows, the integration of time and space, the harmonious conception, and the fusion of feelings and scenery.

Plants in the Traditional Chinese Gardens and Paintings

Palace paintings of Qing Dynasty have a certain documentary meaning, showing the landscape of traditional gardens at that time. The relationship between paintings and the imperial gardens was discussed in this paper. For example, *The Painting of Twelve Seasons*, delicate and beautiful, depicted the gorgeous scenery of the imperial garden of the early Qianlong period. Some scholars believe that the painting is a combination of the poems and real scenes of Emperor Qianlong (Lin, 1982, p. 99); some view this painting as historical architectural data and analyze the relationship between Chinese gardens and architecture space (Han, 1982). Different spaces and activities of typical garden scenes in the 12 months are depicted in the painting, which was hung separately according to the scenes of each month, reflecting the different landscape of the imperial garden in Qing Dynasty.

Time Order of Chinese Garden

In the flow of time pass, ancient philosophers and poets often feel the orderly change of seasons with their meditative mind. This philosophical thought of time also has a profound impact on the aesthetic of traditional garden.

The construction of the imperial gardens in the Qing dynasty is the unity of time and space. Furthermore, seasonal changes in the garden, rich and colorful, mainly reflect in the plant landscape and people's activities in the garden. Twenty-four Flowering Trade Winds is widely believed in the three months of spring, when a large number of beautiful flowers were planted in the imperial garden, such as apricot (*Armeniaca vulgaris*), plum (*Prunus salicina*), pear (*Pyrus* spp).

As we can see in the paintings, pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), and lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) are typical ornamental plants of the imperial garden, which blossom in summer. Additionally, the lotuses on the lake took up most of the area in the *Painting of Naliang in June*, red and white, with the shore shaded by willows, just as *Yuan Ye* said, "the wind blew over the ten-mile lotuses, and bringing fragrance to the pavilion" (Ji, 2017).

Typical ornamental plants of the imperial garden in autumn include *Osmanthus fragrans*, *Chrysanthemum morifolium*, cockscomb (*Celosia cristata*), and so on. It is a Chinese traditional custom to appreciate chrysanthemum in September, when their flowers are in various colors, placed on standing basins and displayed for appreciation.

It was illustrated in the winter paintings that most plants in the northern gardens were defoliated. Therefore, evergreen plants such as pines (*Pinus* sp.), cypresses (*Sabina chinensis*), and winter flowering species such as wintersweets (*Chimonanthus praecox*) and plums (*Armeniaca mume*) were depicted in the paintings. For instance, a large quantity of pines and cypresses were planted in the *Meditation Painting of November*, which set off the majestic style of the imperial garden.

Planting Methods

The main planting methods of Chinese gardens include solitary planting, opposite planting, and cluster planting. First, when the garden courtyard is spacious, a big, solitary tree, preferably of antique variety, can serve as the main theme of a composition as well as the unifying factor between different buildings (Tong, 2018, p. 235). A solitary tree can attract people's attention, in the paintings, of which the postures are elegant, including pines, willows (*Salix* spp.), Chinese scholar trees (*Sophora japonica*), and plums. Second, opposite planting is mainly used on both sides of the main buildings to highlight the key position. Meanwhile, the main hall building is flanked by cypresses to set off the solemn meditation atmosphere of the main hall building in the *Painting of November*. Third, as for cluster planting, it is common to see that three or five individuals are arranged as the main scenery of the courtyard in the painting, or as a subordinate role with garden rocks, pitched and balanced.

Covered and Divided: Spatial Function of Plants

In Chinese gardens, plants can create a quiet and elegant living environment through providing shade, reducing noise, and giving off fragrance. A special bamboo structure was described by Sima Guang in Dule Yuan,

there is marsh in the north of building, an island was in the central of the marsh, on which bamboo was planted, circle three zhangs, shape as jade, the tips of twigs tied with ropes, just like fisherman's cottage, was called *fishing temple*, (Sima, 1935)

which provided an introverted space of the garden. However, in the Ming Dynasty, the painter Qiu Ying depicted the image of the hut in his painting, through which we can have a basic understanding of the bamboo hut (Figure 1).

Further speaking, *cypress pavilion* is one of the most popular structures created by growing plants in southern gardens of the Middle Ming Dynasty. Four cypress trees are used in the upper part to form the space, which is not only regarded as an architectural spot but also endowed with profound cultural significance (Gu, 2014). However, the structures created by growing plants are inflexible, which is difficult to integrate into the overall garden space dominated by buildings. The late Ming Dynasty saw a great development in the construction of gardens, technology of wooden structure developed rapidly. Hence, this way of planting such as *cypress pavilion* gradually retired from the stage of garden history.

The wooden structure, such as trellis, formed a shadow place, in which people can take relaxation. For instance, grape is a very common climbing plant in the imperial gardens, which can be used in trellis, and as productive landscape as well. In the 17th chapter of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is recorded that Jia Zheng and his companions were visiting the Grand View Garden; there were descriptions of "bramble (*Rubus rosifolius* var. *coronaries*) shelf, costustoot (*Rosa banksiae*) shed" and "overgrown roses on trellis in the courtyard" (Figure 2).

Flower screen, as a garden element, where climbing plants went up in bamboo screen, can divide space and enrich garden view, with a very extensive application, which is more transparent and flexible than the common wall. According to the relevant description in the *Zhang Wu Zhi* written by Wen Zhenheng of Ming Dynasty, “when you see someone’s garden, bamboo was always used as a screen, with colorful roses on it” (Wen, 2017). Li Yu said, “the equipment of cultivation, not better than the former method of using bamboo screen” (Li, 2007). Well known is the rose as the main species, which was believed in *Mirror of Flowers* that “rose is the most appropriate species to act as plant screens” (Chen, 1979). It was also said in *Sketches of Idle Pleasure* that “rose rank the first place of screen flowers” (Li, 2007). Besides, there were other plants, such as rugosa rose (*Rosa rugosa*), bramble, and costustoot, etc.

In Ming and Qing Dynasties, flower screens were popular as the element to separate the space and enclose the landscape at the entrance. Thus, there is a record in Wang Shizhen’s *Yanshan Garden*, “woven bamboo were seen as the wall at the entrance road the garden, with red and white *Rosa multiflora*, bramble, *Rosa chinensis*, and lilacs on them” (Chen & Zhang, 1983). The vertical elements on both sides of the road formed a fragrant linear space called *Rexiang Path*. Analogously, the entrance space of *Garden for Keeping Strong Will* was called *Caifang Path*, of which the bamboo screen at the entrance is made from the mixed planting of the rosaceous plants, bramble, and rugosa rose (Jung, 2015). From the cases above, we can see that the flower screen is implemented as the major vertical element of outdoor space, and scent of flowers hits you as you walk through the entrance, which serves as wall to divide the world outside and inside.

Particularly, a kind of movable flower screen was recorded in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* written by Shen Fu, which can be used for reference as follows. There are six screens of each whole screen, with two branches of wood about four or five inches long for short bench like. There are four horizontal crosspieces, each one about a foot wide, of which the four corners were gouged holes to insert bamboo, interlaced into a basic frame. Thus, a screen frame about six or seven feet high is ready. Then, vine plants such as lentils (*Lablab purpureus*) were planted in arenaceous basin and put in the screen, waiting for branches and leaves to overgrow whole screen frame. This “live flower screen” that two people can move, randomly put everywhere in the yard to cover or divide space. Like a window full of green, the device can let the wind through and block the sun. So as the name suggests, it can be changed randomly, which is very suitable for rural life.



Figure 1. Fishing temple in Dule Yuan, the bamboo hut depicted by Qiu Ying in his painting. Source: Cleveland Museum, the United States.



Figure 2. The rose shelf in the courtyard acts as a barrier, and can be visited through flower screen. Source: Sun Wen’s illustrations of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, c. 1818: Lüshun Museum, Dalian.

Borrowed Scenery, Opposites, and Harmony

Borrowed scenery is an important method for Chinese gardens to break boundaries, and create a lively aesthetic realm. As described in the final chapter of *Yuan Ye*, “the most important thing in a garden is to borrow scenery” (Ji, 2017). The imperial gardens, which cover a large area, were set off by the distant countryside, farmland, mountains, lakes, etc. Chinese gardens have a coherent water system, with several sluices at the end of the outside streams, to bring water into the garden. Take the painting of *Floating Wine Cups Along Winding Water of March* for example, the natural water flows from the foot of the hill in the distance, across a stone bridge, through the farmland, then across a wooden bridge, flowing into the garden through the sluice, and becomes a curve stream, with wine cups flowing among scholars.

In traditional Chinese garden, the relationship between *xu* (virtual) and *shi* (real) is the unity of opposites. Through the management of the location and volume of buildings and plants, Chinese architectural art has always been considering both *shi* and *xu*, and *xu* is generated from *shi*, forming a unique artistic feature of Chinese garden. If the architecture is called *shi*, the pond will be *xu*; “if there is a pond in front, then a terrace pavilion must be built to make it clear”. Some place with no painting should be left in the garden, which can evoke people’s infinite imagination.

The concept of harmony was emphasized in traditional Chinese gardens, which means garden elements integrated with the surrounding environment perfectly. Landscape architecture is composed of a series of natural elements that have significant evolutionary implications (Zhang, Tang, He, & Lai, 2018). In other words, the overall artistic feature of the garden is generated in the harmonious relationship interacted between the garden elements, which play complementary roles of each other. For instance, several buildings in the central scenic area of the Humble Administrator’s Garden are sparse and scattered, so that only densely planted trees can compensate for the lack of buildings, and play a leading role as interface in the limited space.

According to the changes in the topography, pavilions stood on the mountain with a large number of pines, cypresses, maples, which make the mountain steeper. On the other hand, the lake in the garden usually took up wide area planting lotus, reflected the sky and clouds. What’s more, the garden objects behind were properly hidden by foreground, such as rocks, buildings, and plants, enriched water space, and set off the water far-reaching and implicit. Additionally, the source of water in Chinese gardens was always hidden by plants, rocks, bridges, etc., which made the flow of water inexhaustible.

Fusion of Scenery and Feelings of Chinese Garden

In Chinese gardens, the temperament of flowers and trees symbolize people’s characters and become humanistic carriers to express philosophy. Literati had external feelings on the natural, social, and cultural environment and integrated emotions into the garden, so as to get inner understandings (Tang & Fu, 2019). Consequently, the plants in the Chinese gardens, with the significance of personality symbols, make the visitors have emotional resonance and the affective interaction. Take an example of chrysanthemum, which blooms in late autumn, showing fearlessness of the frost and cold season, thus, it was used to symbolize the noble hermit and those people with moral integrity. Moreover, emperor Kangxi of Qing Dynasty once said, “we should appraise *zhilan* for its morality and appreciate pine and bamboo for its chastity...this also exist in traditional culture of ancient China called Bi-xing thinking, which we should all familiar with”. On one hand, flowers and

trees in Chinese gardens express the aesthetic concept of the owner. On the other hand, the evergreen plants, such as pines, cypresses, widely planted in imperial gardens, expressing the everlasting imperial power of the emperors.

Garden plants became an important part of the cultural life of literati, scholar-officials, and emperor, who appreciated the leisure and elegant life in the process of planting flowers and grass, which should be designed according to the temperament of them, expressed mood and taste of the owner. The configuration of plants follows the rules of auspicious connotations, such as five willows. Historically, five willows were derived from Tao Yuanming's *Biography of Mr. Wuliu*, which is a typical symbol of seclusion and elegance.

As Wang Fuzhi once said, "the feelings and the scenery, named two, yet cannot be separated" (Wang, 1981), meaning that the garden scenery fits in the viewer's inner emotional world. That is, the owner of the garden conveyed the sentiment by the scenery arrangement, while the visitors were affected when they viewing the scenery, from which the aesthetic conception of Chinese garden was generated.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to study plant aesthetics of Qing Dynasty, based on palace paintings, especially *The Painting of Twelve Seasons*, and other books, theories in Ming and Qing Dynasties. With the secularization of aesthetics of the era, its landscape design shows correlation to the activities of garden residence. Besides, the layout of its spatial elements such as buildings, plants, rocks, and water complement each other to create a harmonious garden. The relationship between palace paintings and the real space of gardens was revealed. And the aesthetic characteristics of the garden in the Qing Dynasty have been discussed as the integration of garden, and painting, the creation of plant space and the harmony of the elements. Meanwhile, the process of appreciation and understanding of landscape planting itself is an artistic creation process that depends on the visitors' quality and culture. Consequently, it is particularly crucial for garden owners to fully grasp the visitors' aesthetic taste of landscape planting and express it properly.

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