

Study on the Aesthetics of Classical Chinese Garden Landscape

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Abstract:

Chinese classical gardens have always enjoyed a high reputation in the world for their distinctive aesthetic characteristics, which is inseparable from Chinese classical culture. In addition to the obvious embodiment of Chinese philosophy and artistic style, it also demonstrates the aesthetic taste of Chinese people through incisive and vivid expression of traditional Chinese people's feelings towards heaven, earth and nature. Both the fresh charm of small bridges over the flowing stream and the scenery of dense willow trees and bright flowers fully reflect their ideal pursuit of the combination of human and nature. By sorting out the development history of Chinese classical gardens, this paper analyzes their unique aesthetic characteristics, macroscopically summarizes the impact on them exerted by Chinese philosophy in gardening, style, aesthetics, etc., interprets and dissects the spatial construction techniques of Chinese classical gardens, in the hope of providing reference for contemporary Chinese garden landscape.

Keywords: China, Classical gardens, Aesthetic, traditional culture

I. Aesthetic View of Chinese Classical Gardens

i . Evolution and Development of Chinese Classical Gardens

In the long course of development, the development of Chinese classical gardens has roughly gone through four stages, namely, the initial stage, the development stage, the mature stage and the later mature stage. Originated from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the oriental classical gardens generally took shape in the Qin and Han dynasties. The early Chinese classical garden architecture mainly served the nobles. The vast royal gardens are breathtaking and magnificent. Rising in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, temple gardens started to be accessible to ordinary people. It was in this period that the idea of garden aesthetics was laid down and the soil sufficient for the

great development of Chinese classical gardens was bred. In the subsequent Sui and Tang dynasties, Chinese classical gardens entered a period of rapid development and reached a peak at one point. The prosperity of Sui and Tang dynasties brought abundant resources and economic strength to various regions, which stimulated the exuberant vitality and the formation of distinctive style characteristics of Chinese classical gardens. When it came to the Southern and Northern Song dynasties and the early Qing dynasty, the Chinese classical gardens had possessed the solid soil. Certain wealthy businessmen and officials began to show their aesthetic height by building gardens in their homes, which promoted the gradual transition of Chinese classical gardens from the minority to the majority. Chinese classical gardens entered the later mature stage in the middle and late Qing dynasty, when their construction tended to become increasingly exquisite and beautiful on the basis of maintaining the stability in the early stage, which was the embodiment of the atmospheric beauty of Chinese classical gardens. By contrast, in view of the fact that the development of art had always been subject to the political restrict at that time, the Chinese classical gardens failing to obtain economic support presented certain decadence due to the lack of positive exploration and innovation spirit in the early stage.

ii. Aesthetic Characteristics of Chinese Classic Gardens

Originating from nature, Chinese classical gardens have also transcended nature. With the natural scenery and landscape as the foundation of the landscape, the vast expanse of Chinese landscape is decorated with innumerable vegetation, which constitutes the basic appearance of the natural scenery. Drawing lessons from the beauty of natural scenery, Chinese classical gardens present a harmonious natural beauty by integrating these elements into the construction of classical gardens. The Chinese classical landscape has achieved almost the perfect adaptation and blend of the natural aesthetics with architectural aesthetics. In view of the fact that the nature with endless winding mountains and rivers always tend to bring the sense of grandeur, the water bodies presented in Chinese classical gardens are mostly external rivers, lakes, mountain springs and streams, etc., and the construction of them also follows the principle of "being artificial yet as if they are made by nature". No matter how small the mountains and lakes are, they present the same lines and meandering feeling as the real ones, while certain islands, embankments and bridges are bound to be designed in the larger water area, which brings the feeling of sparrows being small and complete. The plant configuration of the gardens is also magnificent and colorful, which is mainly based on lush trees in that the forest green trees can most bring people into the nature and possess the most vitality. Given that ancient people are used to endowing flowers and trees with favorable traits, the ornament of flowers and trees in gardens also implies that the owners of them have noble and pure qualities, thus being fond of by people due to the good connotation. Regardless of the quantity and area, the Chinese classical gardens always strive to demonstrate the elements of landscape, flowers and trees in gardens, as well as skillfully transform architectural beauty into natural beauty by highlighting the coordination features of each other, thus achieving the realm of harmony between man and nature.

The most typical manifestation of the aesthetic view of Chinese classical gardens is the beauty of artistic conception, which is an indispensable part of traditional oriental garden architecture. In addition to being the aesthetic embodiment, the mood may naturally give rise to certain perceptions among the people in them. Artistic conception has been emphasized in a number of art categories of the Chinese nation, among which calligraphy, painting and poetry all pay attention to artistic conception. Unlike the above two-dimensional art types, gardens possess special spatiotemporal characteristics and multiple dimensions of experience. Considering that the appreciation perspectives of people and landscape are both in change with time and season and people in the garden enjoy the experience of visual, auditory and olfactory at the same time, in addition to the extension of traditional visual arts, garden is also a broader field of art, which leads to a more direct and clear aesthetic feeling.

With the development of garden construction, changes have taken place in the aesthetic view of Chinese classical gardens. From the unity of man and nature as well as hidden in the earthliness in the six dynasties to the deep popularity of Buddhism in the middle and Tang dynasties, people's perception of beauty transited from wild nature to the inner perception, while the garden construction also shifted from the unity with the deep cultural artistic conception of the natural environment to the focus on the creation of "the realm of being at your service and being driven by people". The maturity of neo-confucianism in the Ming and Qing dynasties was the representation of people's cognition reaching an unprecedented height, which offered a positive answer to the existence of "temperament". The landscaping of gardens in this period vividly manifested the rhythm of life and the embodiment of personality.

II. Impact of Philosophy on Chinese Classical Gardens

In addition to the graceful space artistic conception, Chinese classical gardens also have deep cultural connotations and gardening ideas. The respect for the gardening idea of "being artificial yet as if they are made by nature" shows that people will achieve the goal of reproducing the beautiful scenery of nature by respecting and advocating nature in the construction of gardens. This idea exactly originates from Chinese philosophy, which emphasizes the harmony and unity between man and nature as well as appreciates and admires the beauty of nature without modification.

i. Distinct Superiors and Inferiors, and endowing Scenes with Emotions

Chinese culture had presented the ideology of contention among hundreds of schools of thought as early as in the pre-Qin dynasty, while Confucianism has been attested by time to be the most tenacious among the hundred schools of thought. Confucian culture almost turned into the mainstream of Chinese culture in the Han dynasty. Confucian culture's emphasis on ritual and law highlights the sense of hierarchy and distance between people, which has obvious reflection in the gardens. For example, a great number of gardens are divided along a central axis and symmetrical to the left and right, with the left being Zhao and the right Mu, showing distinct superiority and inferiority. Based on the natural geography, people artificially polish and beautify the classical

Chinese gardens by organically unifying the buildings, landscapes and vegetation. At the same time, due to the influence of the thought of "telling a story through a material object", every plant tends to be compared with the noble qualities of human beings. Confucius once said, "the intelligent people like waters and benevolence people like mountains.", which, by comparing mountains and rivers with human's kindness and wisdom, explains that human's aesthetic appreciation and cognition of mountains and rivers will be affected by their moral concepts, while the beauty of mountains and rivers is presented precisely because they are endowed with moral qualities of human beings. This art technique is frequently adopted in Chinese classical gardens, such as plants of pine, bamboo, plum, etc. that are commonly seen in Chinese classical gardens, in which the pine symbolizes the indomitable spirit of human beings and their longevity, the bamboo symbolizes their modesty and integrity, while the plum represents the noble, pure and tough character of human beings.

ii. Tao Models Itself after Nature, and Forget Oneself and Anything Else

As an indigenous school originating from China, Taoism and Taoist ideas have exerted a profound influence on Chinese classical gardens. The so called "Tao models itself after nature" refers to conform, respect and harmonize with nature. However, this does not mean that people are forbidden to change nature. Only by adapting to nature can the effect of "coming naturally" be achieved. Even the artificial gardens are pursuit and refinement of nature conducted by human beings, thereby are part of nature. Impacted by Taoism, what are pursued by Chinese classical gardens are freedom and unrestrained, the contrast between the real and the imaginary, the return to simplicity and the light and ethereal. "Tao makes one, one makes two and two makes three." It is believed by Taoism that the world is originated from simplicity, and that simplicity, plainness and quietness are beautiful. The waters in Chinese gardens are mainly plain and elegant still ones, while the those in European gardens are mostly dynamic ones that focus on the lively surging of them. Different from the positive thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism advocates conforming to nature, while denying the benevolence and righteousness of Confucianism and criticizing the imprison brought by rites and music. Therefore, when reflected in the Chinese classical gardens, Taoism is manifested as following the natural integration, pursuing spiritual perception and realizing the state of forgetting oneself and anything else with the feeling of perceiving heaven and earth. Based on the simulation of the nature, the gardeners planned the garden space as a whole in accordance with people's living demands and taking eliminating artificial traces and restoring the natural appearance to the largest extend as the principle. It thus can be concluded that the feeling that less wins more and the beauty of artistic conception is superior than that of forms is pursued in the construction of gardens, which is exactly what believed by Lao Tseu that "heaven and earth have great beauty without words", that is, the highest beauty is the unadorned beauty of natural objects, which can only be obtained by maintaining the inner tranquility and experiencing the beauty of nature in senses.

iii. Emptiness and Find One's True Self

Being introduced into China at the end of the eastern Han dynasty, developing rapidly in the Wei and Jin dynasties and reaching its peak in the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism formed the Buddhism thought with Chinese characteristics through the integration with the local Confucianism and Taoism. Advocating that everything is empty and believing that emptiness is the essence of the world, Buddhism is characterized in aesthetic by ethereal, quietness and remoteness. It argues that all human beings have minds and hearts and that they persist in the pursuit of an attitude of detachment from the world, even in the midst of noisy earthliness. The promotion of monks such as Xuanzang and Huiyuan led to the appearance of well-known temple gardens such as Lingyin Temple in Zhejiang Province and Hanshan Temple in Suzhou, the publicity of Buddhism in which brings strong religious color to the gardens. People are used to study and engage in Buddhist study and activities in private gardens in southern China. Buddhist thoughts are mostly embodied in plants, buildings, space construction, etc.. In terms of plants, common Buddhist plants in gardens include lotus, willow and water lily with different connotations. In terms of architecture, Wen Zhenheng mentioned 20 parts about residential matters in *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, such as "residence, flowers and trees, water and stone, birds and fish, calligraphy and painting, utensils, location", etc., as well as Buddhist buildings and implements such as "hill building, narrow room, Buddhist hall, incense burner", etc.. The so called "find one's true self" refers to realize the original true nature through calming down and eliminating distractions. In terms of garden space construction, given that what advocated by Buddhism is to return to the soul and endow it with real liberation and freedom, its aesthetic manifestation are the emphasis on the original beauty of natural objects and the pursuit of elegant and quiet artistic conception.

III. The Expression of Mountains and Waters

i. The Expression of Mountains

Mountains have always been regarded as the backbone of traditional Chinese gardens, while stone is one of the basic elements of mountains. With the inevitable shape of stones in every classical garden, they are also called the "skeletons of the garden". Hill stones split different scenes by dividing the space. Stones in gardens takes ugliness as beauty. "Grotesque stones take ugliness as beauty, and the extreme ugliness can also be regarded as a kind of beauty of danger and strangeness", which, rather than the real ugliness, is a kind of beauty of danger and strangeness presented by the irregular nature of stones and breaking the monotonous atmosphere of the regular courtyard through the intricate combination. In gardens, gardeners embody different meanings by shaping different images of hill stones. Both the exquisitely carved Taihu Lake stones and sharp-edged yellow stones can be artificially processed to highlight the natural shape in senses.

ii. The Expression of Waters

As the soul of Chinese classical garden, "suppose the hill stones are skeletons of the garden, then waters are the blood ". The water in gardens appears in various forms, including lakes, pools, rivers,

streams, and streams. With pure beauty, the purity of water is usually expressed through words such as clear spring and pure river. Whether it is "The moon is shining among the pines, and the water is flowing over the stones." written by Wang Wei, or "The fields are endless, and the distant sky seems lower than the trees nearby; the night had come, and the moon high in the sky is reflected in the clear water and is so close to the men in the boat" written by Meng Haoran, both vividly reflect the clarity of the water. Water is also featured with nothingness, which is static in Taoism. Therefore, water is characterized by being both static and dynamic at the same time. In spite of being invisible and colorless, it reflects everything in the world when it is untouchable, which happens to be consistent with Taoism's thought of "emptiness". Meanwhile, the nothingness of water is also reflected in the contrast with the physical images of buildings, plants and hill stones in gardens, which is just like the role of "leaving white space" in Chinese landscape painting. In addition, by combining the flexibility of water with the hill stones in gardens, flowing waterfalls and streams are formed to increase the sense of spatial hierarchy and add interest to the garden touring.

Mountains and waters have always been the focus of people's depiction in traditional Chinese culture in that the devotion to mountains and waters can broaden feelings, so it is in the construction of classical Chinese gardens. In addition to providing people with greater space for reverie, the appearance of mountains and waters can also enhance the broad sense of the building area and the elegance of the overall landscape. Moreover, due to the influence of the seclusion of philosophy for a long time, implicit and euphemistic expression and the method of arousing association and reflecting feelings in virtue of objects have been adopted, the techniques of the combination of virtual and reality, rarefaction and density as well as the contrast between hidden and exposure are adopted in shaping spatial dimensions.

Influenced by the hermit thought of philosophy for a long time, the implicit and euphemistic expression and the way of evoking association and reflecting feelings by means of things are adopted. Therefore, the methods of combining the real and the virtual, alternating density with density and contrast between hidden and exposed are used in shaping the spatial level.

IV. Conclusion

After evolving and developing for thousand of years, Chinese classical gardens are still dominating the current living environment. The views of ecological environment and harmony between man and nature contained in Chinese classical gardens are also of great practical significance for the improvement of the earth environment. Despite their distinct appearances, classical garden architecture all over the world embodies the desire of gardeners for life and the future as well as the pursuit of tranquil days. With the rapid development of China's urban and rural construction today, various types of garden landscapes with varying design levels have emerged in large number all over China. In addition to the demand of studying the construction techniques of Chinese classical gardens, the garden designers are also expected to focus on the combination with the ecological environment and the presentation of the Chinese traditional culture connotation. Furthermore, the

philosophy reflected in the Chinese classical garden can also be transmitted to people's daily lives through gardens, which shall contribute to the cultivation of people's original nature.

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