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LEARNING FROM NATURE, UNDERSTANDING FROM THE HEART: ANALYSIS OF HUMANISTIC CHARACTERISTICS IN CLASSICAL GARDENS

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ABSTRACT
When discussing classical gardens, the unity of heaven and humanity is a crucial characteristic. Heaven represents natural style, while humanity represents humanistic features. Chinese classical garden art, as a carrier of traditional culture, has a long history and profound connotations. The design concept of "unity between heaven and humanity" permeates every aspect of classical gardens, remaining timeless and providing important reference value for modern residential environment design. This paper focuses on analyzing the "humanistic characteristics" within the "unity of heaven and humanity" in classical gardens through their artistic themes and painterly qualities, aiming to bring the philosophical contemplation of natural landscapes back into people's vision, reviving historical warmth, humanistic care, and the wisdom of landscapes.
KEYWORDS: *Classical gardens; Humanistic characteristics; Artistic themes; Poetic and painterly qualities*

1. INTRODUCTION

Classical gardens, as important carriers of Chinese traditional culture, have their design philosophy of "unity between heaven and humanity" deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical thought. This concept is reflected not only in the physical form of gardens but more importantly through "humanistic characteristics" that perfectly blend natural beauty with humanistic spirit. From the natural perspective of pre-Qin philosophers to Wei and Jin literati's interest in landscapes, and further to Ming and Qing scholars' garden life, classical gardens have consistently been a significant expression of Chinese traditional culture. Understanding the "humanistic characteristics" of classical gardens is crucial for inheriting traditional culture and enhancing modern garden design quality.

The "humanistic characteristics" of Chinese classical gardens are primarily manifested in three aspects: first, through careful creation of natural scenery imbued with cultural connotations; second, through garden themes directly expressing literati sentiments; and third, through the composition principles of landscape painting to create poetic and artistic realms. These characteristics make Chinese classical gardens not merely places for recreation but carriers for expressing literati ideals and spiritual pursuits. From Suzhou gardens to Beijing imperial gardens, from private literati gardens to temple gardens, "humanistic characteristics" remain their common artistic quality. This artistic approach of perfectly combining nature with human culture has formed a unique garden aesthetic system.

Compared to Western classical gardens' emphasis on visual effects, Chinese classical gardens focus more on expressing humanistic spirit through landscape arrangement and poetic inscriptions. This unique artistic expression stems from the aesthetic concept of "unity of feeling and scene" in Chinese traditional culture, also reflecting Chinese traditional literati's deep contemplation of the relationship between nature and culture. Particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the prosperity of literati gardens, garden art deeply integrated with traditional cultural forms such as poetry, calligraphy, and painting, forming a unique garden cultural phenomenon. This paper will explore the humanistic spiritual connotations of classical gardens from three aspects: humanistic characteristics, thematic conception, and painterly creation, revealing their unique artistic value and contemporary significance.

2. MANIFESTATION OF HUMANISTIC CHARACTERISTICS IN CLASSICAL GARDENS

Chinese classical gardens are unique in their ability to seamlessly blend natural beauty with humanistic thought, creating spaces that resonate with both visual and spiritual significance. Unlike Western classical gardens, which often prioritize geometry and symmetry to achieve aesthetic appeal, Chinese classical gardens focus on evoking deep emotional responses and fostering philosophical reflections

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through intricate arrangements of natural and cultural elements. The underlying philosophy of "unity between heaven and humanity" not only guides the physical design but also imbues these gardens with profound humanistic and cultural meaning. This approach highlights the intrinsic connection between humans and nature, reflecting the traditional Chinese worldview of harmony and coexistence.

2.1 Humanistic Characteristics

The humanistic characteristics of classical gardens reflect human thoughts and interests throughout garden design. Classical gardens consider the way of heaven and the way of humanity as interconnected, similar, and harmoniously unified. Garden landscapes possess natural aesthetic qualities that inspire the realms of ultimate truth, goodness, and beauty in humanity. The unity of heaven and humanity represents both the ultimate pursuit and expression of nature and the ultimate pursuit and expression of human character. These two aspects progress in parallel. Therefore, classical gardens draw from nature while being nurtured by poetry, calligraphy, and painting, forming a comprehensive art that integrates these elements. Moreover, carving stones to channel springs and weaving bamboo to make fences show that gardens are both art and life, both ideal and reality. Artists, poets, thinkers, officials, and even emperors participated in craftsmen's construction, which truly reflects the character of traditional Chinese scholars.

This differs greatly from Western classical gardens, which approach more from the perspective of visual landscape appreciation, emphasizing purely pleasant environments (Hegel posited that a simple courtyard should merely serve as a bright and cheerful environment. It is intended to be a space devoid of independent significance, one that does not lead individuals away from human life or distract their thoughts, but remains purely functional and unassuming in nature.). In comparison, the humanistic characteristics of classical gardens serve an educational function in cultivating people through their environment.

2.2 Imbuing Landscapes with Human Thoughts

Mountains and waters embody virtue, while flowers and trees convey emotions. All things reflect human thoughts, feelings, character, and interests. In classical gardens, we can see specific manifestations of mountains and waters embodying virtue, and flowers and trees expressing spirit everywhere. The creation of landscapes actually reflects their spirit through their images.

"Rocks make people feel ancient, water makes people feel distant; rocks and water are most essential in gardens". Mountains raise the garden's three-dimensional space, giving people a sense of ancient vigor through their heavy and magnificent presence. Water expands the garden's planar territory, giving people a sense of quiet profundity through its virtual containment and gentle flow. The images of mountains and water merge with humanistic spirit. The final focus is on highlighting the beauty of humanistic spirit. Confucius said: "The benevolent find pleasure in mountains, the wise find pleasure in waters". Mountains become symbols of benevolent virtue, while waters become symbols of wisdom. This is also true in gardens. Therefore, classical gardens emphasize the arrangement of mountains and management of waters. This reflects not only the literal meaning of mountains and waters but also the comprehension of their spirit. The Five-Peak Immortals' Pavilion in Liu Garden has a marble screen with the couplet: "Quietly observing the mountain's thoughts after rain, leisurely watching the moon's spirit before wind". "Mountain's thoughts" and "moon's spirit" imbue natural scenery with human sentiments, creating an artistic conception similar to Li Bai's "Sitting Alone at Jingting Mountain" with its line "Looking at each other without tiring, only Jingting Mountain and I", expressing the personality of mountains and moon, where humans and nature are like host and guest, sharing in appreciation and enlightenment, finding one's own nature therein - a perfect illustration of the interaction between objects and self (Relevant illustrated PPT materials have been uploaded to Baidu Wenku for reference, accessible at the following link: https://wenku.baidu.com/view/672dc2332b160b4e767fcff4.html?from=search.).

Chinese garden construction generally follows the composition principles of landscape painting theory, creating "three-dimensional paintings". Wang Wei's *Xu Hua* clearly proposed "painting's emotion", advocating that painters should express the beauty of mountains and rivers they perceive through their brushwork, as in "watching autumn clouds, spirit soaring; facing spring winds, thoughts expanding" - what Liu Xie meant by "climbing mountains fills one's emotions with mountains, viewing seas floods one's thoughts with seas". All indicate the unity of natural beauty and natural emotion.

In this "humanized" nature of gardens, plants create "living environments", and garden plants symbolize natural vitality. Classical gardens select plants not merely for their colors and forms but more importantly to embody spiritual character. Chinese classical gardens widely employ artistic techniques of metaphor and association from poetry and painting, endowing plants' natural ecological characteristics with personality meanings to express human thoughts, character, and will, thus creating humanistic characteristics in flowers and trees. As the saying goes, "Emotional peonies contain spring tears, powerless roses lie on evening branches". Plants are carriers of rich cultural information, frequently used as media for expressing aspiration through objects.

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For example, in Lin Daiyu's Xiaoxiang Gallery in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, there are hundreds of emerald bamboo stems, along with large pear trees mixed with banana trees. Bamboo, as one of the "Four Gentlemen", demonstrates integrity - though not thick, it is straight and principled, while being tough and unyielding, fearless of cold and heat, evergreen through ages. Daiyu's choice to live here shows her appreciation and self-identification with this spiritual character. From another perspective, looking at these three plants: pear blossoms in rain, banana leaves in rain, and bamboo as background for rain sounds, all make us feel Daiyu's melancholy, tearful nature. This has a similar artistic conception to the plant configuration of the Rain Listening Pavilion in the Humble Administrator's Garden. Plants as embodiments of personal character give gardens their soul. "Plum makes people noble, orchid makes people secluded, chrysanthemum makes people wild, lotus makes people pure... autumn begonia makes people charming, pine makes people unrestrained, parasol tree makes people clear, willow makes people emotional" (*You Meng Ying* (*Shadows of a Dream*), a collection of aphoristic essays written in a casual style by the Qing dynasty literary figure Zhang Chao, is a notable work of the era.). Although garden plants are numerous, the commonly used twenty-some varieties each have their story, spiritual character, and representative figures. For instance, chrysanthemum found its confidant in Tao Yuanming, plum in Lin Hejing, bamboo in Wang Xizhi, lotus in Zhou Dunyi... lychee in Yang Guifei, tea in Lu Tong and Lu Yu, fragrant grasses in Qu Yuan... banana in Huai Su, melon in Shao Ping... Flowers and trees become special cultural symbols. Su Shi praised Wen Yuke's plum, bamboo, and rock paintings: "Plum is cold yet elegant, bamboo is thin yet long-lived, rock is ugly yet patterned - these are three beneficial friends". Pine, bamboo, and plum are honored as the "Three Friends of Winter", representing loyal friendship formed in frost and severe cold, also used to represent character that can withstand harsh environments and maintain steadfast integrity. The "Winter Cottage" in Yi Garden and "Winter Dwelling" in Retreat and Reflection Garden both capture this meaning.

Additionally, some plants take on auspicious meanings through homophony or their inherent characteristics. For example, at the Hall of Joy and Longevity in the Summer Palace, the front and back courtyards are planted with magnolia, crabapple, and peony, symbolizing "jade hall wealth and honor". In the South Courtyard of "Early Achievement through Clear Ability" Hall in Suzhou Master of Nets Garden, two magnolia trees are planted. The back courtyard has two osmanthus trees, combining to mean "hall full of gold and jade". While the "Bamboo and Pine Carrying Prosperity" door inscription in Master of Nets Garden symbolizes flourishing descendants.

In classical garden landscape creation, whether mountains and waters, plants, or architectural forms and decorations, while reflecting natural interest, they are full of rich human sentiment. This has a subtle educational effect, strengthening society's "rule by virtue". The "rule by virtue" in familiar society and "rule by law" in stranger society complement each other, jointly constituting a healthy and complete society.

2.3 Garden Construction Reveals Literary Mind

Qin (musical instrument), qi (chess), shu (calligraphy), hua (painting), shi (poetry), jiu (wine), and cha (tea) were required courses and general education for ancient scholars. This made it possible for scholars to be both thinkers and painters as well as men of action. Therefore, gardens are not limited to sensory experience. Their highest experience lies in artistic conception. The expression of this artistic conception is not satisfied with letting people comprehend on their own. It is directly embellished through garden themes. Especially by the Qing Dynasty, whether gardens, buildings, or scenic spots, all had themes, combining with poetry, couplets, stele inscriptions, and travel notes to embellish the garden's artistic conception and reflect the owner's spiritual character. For example, the Stay and Listen Pavilion in the Humble Administrator's Garden is for staying to hear the sound of rain on withered lotus leaves. It not only lets people experience the beauty of withered lotus in autumn rain and moonlit breezy coolness but also lets people experience the elegance of strong integrity and gentle composure. Another example: the couplet at Suzhou's Canglang Pavilion reads: "Clear wind and bright moon originally priceless, near water and distant mountains all have feeling". From the small stone pavilion connecting to the vastness of the universe, from lonely scenery to mountain and water friendship. It both expands space and adds interest. The couplet at the Four-Sided Lotus Wind Pavilion in the Humble Administrator's Garden reads: "Four sides of lotus wind three sides of willows, half pond of autumn water one room of mountains". From one-time scenery to four seasons' colors, it extends time. These couplets have both beautiful natural experience and open-minded humanistic sentiment. They integrate limited scenery into infinite time and space, making people endlessly reflective. Emphasizing naming and themes, writing and recording them, garden construction reveals literary mind. Modern gardens often use observation pavilions or are marked with place names and numbers, some directly unnamed. This lacks such guidance and interpretation of realm. This is also the biggest difference between classical gardens and modern gardens, as well as Western classical gardens.

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2.4 Expressing Emotions through Borrowed Scenery in Garden Paintings

Chinese classical gardens can be summarized in four characters: "poetic and painterly qualities". Poetic quality is seen in themes, while painterly quality is seen in scene composition. Poetic and painterly qualities communicate with each other, jointly embodying the unity of heaven and humanity. Painterly quality organizes natural rocks, flowers, and trees according to human aesthetic tastes. "It is necessary to ensure that visitors, no matter where they stand, always see a perfect picture before their eyes" (see Ye Shengtao's *Suzhou Gardens*). For perfect pictorial effect, Chinese garden construction basically follows the composition and framing principles of landscape painting theory. It can be said that Chinese landscape gardens are "three-dimensional paintings". China's most important garden theory works *Yuan Ye* and *Zhang Wu Zhi* were both written by painters. Li Yu, who combined the roles of literary and artistic master, garden theory master, and craftsman, was the author of *Xian Qing Ou Ji*. They were all passionate about garden construction.

Painting theory and garden construction theory complement each other. Different from Western realism, Chinese painting emphasizes capturing spirit over form. Tang Dynasty Zhang Zao's landscape paintings were "objects in the spiritual residence, not in ears and eyes, thus obtained from the heart, responding in the hand. Unique poses and exceptional states emerge at the touch of the brush, with energy interacting in the void, becoming companions with the spirit". In his painting theory *Hui Jing*, he emphasized "learning from nature externally, understanding from the heart internally", along with Chan Buddhism's "thousand hundred dharma gates return to one inch; river sand wonderful virtues all reside in the heart source". Elevating natural beauty to artistic beauty became the standard for Chinese artistic creation.

First, looking at the management of position and layout composition. Song Dynasty Guo Xi's *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* states: "Mountains take water as blood vessels, take grass and trees as hair, take smoke and clouds as spirit and appearance. Thus mountains come alive with water, become magnificent with grass and trees, become beautiful with smoke and clouds. Water takes mountains as face, takes pavilions as eyebrows and eyes, takes fishing as spirit. Thus water becomes charming with mountains, becomes bright and quick with pavilions, becomes expansive with fishing. This is the arrangement of mountains and waters". In the mountain and water arrangements of Crown Cloud Peak in Liu Garden, Four-Sided Lotus Wind Pavilion, Frost-Awaiting Pavilion, and Snow Fragrance Cloud Luxuriance Pavilion in the Humble Administrator's Garden, all embody this spiritual beauty.

From an overall grasp, garden layout deeply understands the essence of "six distances". Through borrowing, blocking, opposing, and highlighting scenes, it clips, selects, and divides surrounding landscape pictures, skillfully incorporating natural beauty inside and outside the garden into the visual frame, forming rich garden appreciation spaces. These "six distances" are both composition rules and aesthetic interests. As Song Dynasty Guo Xi's *Lin Quan Gao Zhi* states: "Mountains have three distances: looking up at the mountain peak from the mountain base is called height distance; peering at the mountain back from the mountain front is called depth distance; viewing distant mountains from near mountains is called level distance. Height distance's momentum is towering; depth distance's scene is overlapping; level distance's meaning is harmonious and increasingly distant". This includes both concrete mountain modeling and aesthetic tastes like momentum, artistic conception. Han Zhuo's *Shan Shui Chun Quan Ji* says: "Having near shore broad water, vast and distant mountains is called broad distance; having misty fog dim and dark, wild water separated and faintly invisible is called misty distance; scenery extremely remote and hazily distant is called secluded distance". This "misty distance", "broad distance" and "secluded distance" focus on describing and summarizing the visual scene effects. They also contain spiritual interests of haziness, vastness, and seclusion. All make people feel both visual and spiritual double pleasures.

From the methods and composition management of piling rocks, one can see painting principles like "arranging mountain forms, taking attachments, dividing rock veins", "main peak should be high and towering, guest mountains should be rushing forward", undoubtedly showing human gathering and dispersing relationships. Wang Wei's *Xu Hua* clearly proposed "painting's emotion", saying "watching autumn clouds, spirit soaring; facing spring winds, thoughts expanding", namely what Liu Xie meant by "climbing mountains fills one's emotions with mountains, viewing seas floods one's thoughts with seas". The main and guest peaks' gathering and dispersing in Yu Garden's rockery and Ge Garden's rockery precisely verify this method.

From specific garden element composition, plant forms include posture, color, and charm. They embody human characteristics and emotions. For example, the *Jieziyuan Huazhuan* contains three groups of typical painting techniques for plants with two, three, and five plants, which are quite representative. Among them, the two-plant method states: "Two plants have two methods: one large adding small is supporting the elderly; one small adding large is carrying the young. Old trees need caring matrons to be affectionate, young trees need graceful and delicate bearing, like people standing together, looking after each other". The three-plant method states: "Although

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arranged in wild goose formation, most avoid roots and tops being entirely even, appearing like bundled firewood. Must have left and right yielding to each other, natural interpenetration". These all carry strong humanistic characteristics. The arrangement of artificial mountain rock groups also has postures like sitting, standing, lying, and walking like humans. Additionally, painting bamboo should express its gracefulness, painting plum should express its nobility. The Master of Nets Garden's One Branch Outside Bamboo Pavilion appreciates plum's sparse shadows; such aesthetic feeling and pictorial effect carry heavy human cultural ties. In short, all garden plants have their stories, symbolism, and are closely related to human spiritual character.

3. CONCLUSION

Chinese classical gardens, as the essence of traditional culture, reflect the unique aesthetic interests and cultural connotations of the Chinese nation through their "humanistic characteristics". Through the humanistic treatment of natural scenery, garden designers not only created beautiful landscapes but more importantly constructed an artistic space that integrates natural beauty with humanistic spirit. From the selection of mountains and waters to the configuration of plants, from architectural layout to garden naming, everything reflects the designers' profound understanding of the relationship between nature and human culture. This design concept of combining natural landscape with humanistic spirit still has important reference significance for contemporary garden design, especially today when pursuing harmonious development of ecology and human culture, the design wisdom of classical gardens appears particularly precious. Garden themes and painterly qualities are two important means of realizing "humanistic characteristics" in classical gardens. Garden themes directly express the garden creators' spiritual pursuits and aesthetic ideals through poetry, couplets, and other forms; while painterly creation follows landscape painting composition principles, transforming natural scenery into poetic artistic forms. These two aspects complement each other, jointly creating garden art with both formal beauty and spiritual beauty. From the delicate elegance of Suzhou gardens to the magnificent momentum of Beijing imperial gardens, from the poetic dwelling of Jiangnan private gardens to the Lingnan characteristics of Lingnan gardens, Chinese classical gardens demonstrate rich and diverse artistic expressions. In contemporary garden design, how to inherit and develop this design concept that emphasizes spiritual connotation deserves deep consideration.

Looking to the future, in today's accelerating urbanization process, how to inherit and innovate the humanistic spirit of classical gardens in modern garden design is a topic worth discussing. The design concept of "learning from nature externally, understanding from the heart internally" in classical gardens can not only help us create more tasteful garden landscapes but also provide modern people with a spiritual home to return to nature and nurture the soul. With people's increasing demand for spiritual culture, the humanistic wisdom contained in classical gardens will play a greater role. This garden art that integrates natural beauty with humanistic spirit can not only improve urban living environments and enhance urban cultural taste but also provide modern people with a spiritual space for dialogue with nature and emotional sustenance. In the process of building beautiful China and realizing cultural confidence, the humanistic spirit of classical gardens will continue to exert its unique value and function.

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