

The More Noble the Owners' Thoughts, the More Poetic Their Gardens: A Literary Perspective on the Aesthetics of Gardens in South of the Yangtze River

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Scholars of the Ming-Qing period envisioned the gardens in South of the Yangtze River as a cultural system with literary sentiment and aspiration by stone layout, water designing, plant transplanting, and pavilion construction. To clearly explain the relationship between garden design and poetry creation, we illustrate that the literary language of engraving the ancient and recounting the old created gardens' aesthetic conception and spiritual culture in the first place. Additionally, classical gardens have profoundly transformed the development of poetry and given impetus to the growth of literature. Finally, the idea of artistic generalization is put forward, namely that gardens become widely known by poetry and everything is poetry. The development of garden literature has not only overcome the anxiety and tension of the rapid decay of gardens but also constructed an unconventional and enduring spiritual garden to support a garden complex with more literal ruins than historical remains and more subjective emotions than concrete buildings.

Keywords: gardens in South of the Yangtze River, aesthetic conception, literary creation, scholars of the Ming-Qing period

“The more noble the owners' thoughts, the more poetic their gardens.” It was the extolment and commendation in the garden record *Qinglian Mountain House* written by Jiru Chen, a calligrapher and painter in the Ming Dynasty. Although the gardens in South of the Yangtze River are not as magnificent as the royal gardens, the scenery is fresh and elegant, with its own character and charm. The design and connotations of gardens are a combination of the owner's well-elaborated craftsmanship spirit and literary heart. Looking back on the literary history of gardens in South of the Yangtze River over the past hundred years, the scholar Chen (2018) proposed that “Chinese gardens and literature are inextricably connected and hardly separated. I believe that the study of Chinese gardens should start with Chinese poetry and literature” (p. 93). The

aesthete Zong (2017) also said, “The beauty presented by gardens can be found in poetry and painting, and garden art creates poetic symbolism and pictorial charm because of poetry and painting” (p. 393). Their opinions have gained wide acceptance, but the study of literature in gardens still lags and takes on a lifeless appearance, focusing only on the general analysis of inscribed boards, couplets, and stones. However, it is not easy to discuss how literature enters the spiritual dimension of classical gardens and explores profound cultural implications in a short essay. Therefore, this paper aims to concentrate on the gardens in South of the Yangtze River during the Ming-Qing period from the literary perspective, and significantly clarifies how to reach the visionary world of gardens in terms of the combination of tangible landscape and invisible Chinese characters.

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Engraving the Ancient, Recounting the Old, and Gardens Are the Home of Poetry

In classical Chinese gardens, especially the literati gardens of the Ming-Qing period, some famous poems merging aesthetic conceptions were often directly transformed into a

sensual foundation for the gardens. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1975) once remarked, “Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings” (p. 89). As a comprehensive art system, gardens in South of the Yangtze River precipitate intangible emotions and solidify wandering minds. The poetic dwelling of literature in this physical environment can be called “Garden, home of poems.”

The History of Ancient Chinese Architecture, written by Dunzhen Liu (1980), stated, “Many important intellectuals and influential people were involved in the design of gardens in South of the Yangtze River, which brought a close combination of gardens with literature and landscape painting. It formed an important stage in the development of Chinese gardens” (p. 172). The provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang were the major centers of art and scholarship. They prided themselves on having an abundance of poets, writers, and painters such as Shizhen Wang, Cheng Ji, Zhenheng Wen, and Lian Zhang. No wonder their gardens are often celebrated with the words, “The gardens in South of the Yangtze River are the best in China.” Those artisans and designers concisely refined the theme of the scenic spots with a poem when conceiving the garden. They then created a beautiful melody by deducing the location of the flora, pavilions, and other garden elements. While visiting the literati gardens, tourists ought to keep poetry constantly in mind. As the Italian aesthetician, Benedetto Croce (2017) said, “In that moment of contemplation and judgment, our spirit is one with that of the poet, and at that moment we and he are one thing. In this identity alone resides the possibility that our little souls can echo great souls, and grow great with them in the universality of the spirit” (p. 121). The artistic pursuit of tranquility and naturalness in traditional gardens is distinctly related to the concept of building gardens with less than more. Designers often used small dotted or symbolic landscape scenes to “echo great souls” and conveyed literary aesthetic thoughts, suggesting elegant simplicity and broad-mindedness. Xianchen Wang and Zhengming Wen, who were frustrated in officialdom and built a garden in seclusion, were described as soulmates in the history of classical Chinese gardens. They expanded the Dahong Temple into the Humble Administrator’s Garden, derived from a phrase in *Xianjufu* (*On the Leisure Life*), a poem from Pan Yue, “The humble administrator tills the land and waters the garden to make a living.” In addition, the east garden of the Humble Administrator’s Garden was

named “Returning to Fields and Gardens,” in order to put forward the aesthetic appeal and utopian ideal in Yuanming Tao’s poem *Guiyuantianju* (*Returning to Fields and Gardens*). With careful and poetic arrangements in such a confined space, the Humble Administrator’s Garden looks delicate and elegant at every point, and spacious and smooth in every direction. It convincingly demonstrates the ingenuity of Chinese garden design, which enables sparsity artistically spaced with density and *multum in parvo*.

Landscape creation was only the first step in the spiritual ecological construction of gardens. There would also be chiseling inscriptions on the main buildings, cave doors, or rocks with scenic names. The perfect appearance of necessary decorative elements is a sublimation of the aesthetic standard of the garden. Hegel (1975) argued that architecture was “inherently non-spiritual and shapeable only according to the laws of gravity” (p. 624). On the contrary, literature was “the absolute and true art of the spirit and its expression as spirit, and the richest and most unrestricted of the arts” (Hegel, 1975, p. 626). Therefore, in terms of the aesthetic definition, architecture is the most material art, while poetry is the most spiritual art. It held the same view with the philosophical language “What is above form is called Dao, and what is under form is called an object” in *Zhouyi* (*Book of Changes*). In addition to transforming the metaphysical spirit into the material entity—the building—the literati gardens also practically emphasize literary language’s aesthetic function, so gardens are permeated with emotional expression and literary refinement of Ming and Qing scholars. The seventeenth chapter of *Hongloumeng* (*A Dream of Red Mansions*) depicted Zheng Jia, Baoyu Jia, and all the guests enjoying the scenery while inscribing poems for the scenery in the Grand View Garden. At this point, author Xueqin Cao expressed his own views by referring to Zheng Jia, “If the garden has the most beautiful scenery and the most spectacular pavilions but no inscriptions, it is dull and lifeless after all.” It is precisely pointed out that the metaphysical literary language—plaques and couplets—has a prominent spiritual influence on the physical construction—pavilions, plants, and landscapes, reflecting the builders’ artistic experience and literary creation.

Moreover, another significant feature of literary expression of gardens in South of the Yangtze River is that the words mostly come from established literary works. It was prevalent for inscriptions, couplets, monuments, horizontal tablets, stone carvings, and interior hangings to extract implications from classical Chinese poetry, prose, and songs. It is well known that Xueqin Cao and Baoyu Jia were open-minded rather than

feudalistic. However, they still summarized the essence of garden literature with “Modern poetry will never be better than the ancient in the same way as it is better to cut and polish on the ancient works than engraving the modern ones” in *Hongloumeng*. It is easy for travelers to associate relevant characters, events, and aesthetic thoughts with the familiar ancient literature in the gardens, so as to stimulate their artistic imagination and entrust their subjective sentiments. Taking the Surging Waves Pavilion as an example, Xiu Ouyang wrote in the poem *Canglangting (the Surging Waves Pavilion)*, “The clear wind and bright moon are originally invaluable, that it’s a pity only to be sold forty thousand qian.” In Shunqin Su’s *Guosuzhou (Passing through Suzhou)*, there is another line: “Green poplars and egrets are all enjoying themselves, and the nearby water and the distant mountains are all in affection.” Therefore, Zhangju Liang, a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, engraved a “couplet combining poems” on the pillars of the Surging Waves Pavilion, which reads, “The clear wind and bright moon are invaluable, and the nearby water and the distant mountains are all in affection.” In terms of form, it has seamlessly combined the upper and lower couplets; in terms of content, it expresses the profound understanding of the literati to appreciate the beauty of the garden; in terms of emotion, it is an opportunity to give new coherence to the two famous poets Xiu Ouyang and Shunqin Su. The collective composition reminds tourists of the solid friendship between the three poets and brings them into a world of fascinating scenery with deep cultural connotations. Besides, the Delight-Lodging Garden in Wuxi was inspired by two verse lines of a poem from a great calligrapher Xizhi Wang, “Graciousness and wisdom beget pleasure, hills and rivers lodge delight.” The Eight Sounds Creeks in the garden were made of yellow stones, with ancient trees planted above and clear water flowing below. When visitors wander in there, it is like walking in a quiet valley. Blessed with such sound-appreciation scenery created by flowing water, it turns out to be a unique masterpiece of classical Chinese gardens. The Eight Sounds Creeks not only derived its name from a noted poem by Si Zuo “Fine music comes from strings and flutes, as well as from mountains and water.” It also evokes the poetic sentiment of “Among pine-trees bright moonbeams peer, o’er crystal stones flow water clean,” which is a famous verse from Wei Wang’s poem *Shanjuqiuming (Autumn Evening in the Mountains)*.

In addition, Chinese literati gardens have many different types of architecture, such as halls, corridors, and study rooms. Garden owners were keen on reading, writing,

painting, and gardening in these buildings equipped with elegant furniture and literary collections. Although such buildings in the gardens are generally small, it is of great significance whether it is for private or royal book storage. For example, Tianyi Pavilion built in the Ming Dynasty was named “Pavilion,” but it represents the individual character of private gardens with picturesque ponds and poetic landscape. What embodies its literary implication best is the collection of superior quality and enormous quantity, which stored valuable books, inscriptions, artifacts, calligraphy, and paintings from the great sages. What is more, the Fleeing Clouds Mansion in the Garden of Pleasure used to be the private library of Wenbin Gu, the garden builder, housing hundreds of rare books and precious artistic works as well. The name was taken from Dongpo Su’s saying “Paintings and calligraphy works, just like other lovely and cherished things in life, are just as fleeting clouds.”

At the same time, gardens in South of the Yangtze River were also built where poets lived and wrote. Mu Du expressed his longing for his friend by depicting graceful scenery and historical attractions. It was described in *Jiyangzhouhanchuopanguan (For Han Chuo, Judge of Yangzhou)*, “Twenty-four fairies on the bridge steeped the moonbeam, are they still playing on the flute now as before?” Since then, Listening-to-Flute Garden has been built on the west bank of the Twenty-Four Bridges. The garden is humble but poetic, which makes visitors fascinated and enchanted.

Classical Gardens Add New Impetus to the Prosperity of Poetry

The previous section discussed that the famous poem came before the garden was formed. In turn, the subsequent analysis reveals that classical gardens have profoundly transformed the development of poetry and given impetus to the growth of literature. Chinese literati highlighted the connection between poetry and gardens in their ability to create aesthetic imagery. As Qichang remarked in *Huachanshisuibi (Essay on Painting the Zen Room)*, “Poetry takes mountains and rivers as artistic conception, and so do mountains and rivers.” Although this verse is not directly related to gardens, it also applies to them, which refers to the mutual dependence and seamless integration of poetry and gardens. Due to the horror caused by political prosecution against those associated with prisoners, and the literati’s detest against the Confucian school of idealist philosophy, poets often projected the vigorous

garden aesthetic thoughts onto the literary creation. A series of literary works, such as gardening records and poems based on gardens' scenery, life, and sentiments, have emerged in great quantities. It provides a theoretical basis for future research on Ming and Qing garden culture and holds up a mirror that comprehensively contributes insight into the literati's social activities and reclusive mentality. As Congzhou Chen stated in his preface to Chen (1983): "A thorough understanding of garden literature combing history, methodology and argumentation is the foundation of exploring classical Chinese gardens" (p. 1).

The Lingering Garden is a wonder in South of the Yangtze River and is entitled "the first celebrated garden in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces." Amounts of structures are laid out within such a limited area without making it crowded. On the one hand, by employing diverse architectural techniques and forms, the whole garden fully reflects the owner's preference for the pastoral scenery and takes on a distinctive charm unseen elsewhere, arousing the poets' artistic instincts and poetic imagination; on the other hand, the garden requires being extolled and improved by literary creation, where is able to savor the beauty and aware of subtle meanings. Upon entering the Lingering Garden, a long and narrow passage leads the visitor through a few turns, some bright and others dark, to a tracery wall through which he may faintly detect rocks in a pool. It is not until he turns around and reaches Mingse Tower that rocks are submerged in the water, trees and flowers are trailing around. And then he realizes that he has unconsciously become a part of a poetic painting in the manner depicted in the famous lines by Juyi Bai: "The beauty showed up after being invited a thousand times, still hiding half her face behind her pipa lute." At that moment, struck with sudden inspiration, the poet seized the occasion so opportunely offered and created a poem for the garden, such as "It's more interesting to watch the green hills quietly after the rain; it's more spiritual to enjoy the moon leisurely with the wind." These literary masterpieces praising the scenery play a dominant role in building a spiritual ecology of gardens. Croce (2017) observed that "The points of view, pointed out by men of taste and imagination, to which more or less aesthetic travelers and excursionists afterward have recourse in pilgrimage, whence a kind of collective suggestion" (p. 99). With regard to the garden scenery of the Lingering Garden and even the whole south of the Yangtze River, the Chinese literati and poets were full of "taste and imagination," and their poems about the garden were a "collective suggestion." When enjoying the gardens, especially for "more or less

aesthetic travelers," they would be definitely impressed with "Scenery has no place in poetry unless there are feelings for it, feelings cannot be stirred without the inspiration of scenery" as Xiwen Fan wrote. Classical Chinese prose and poetry are similar to designing gardens in that they stress the importance of molding different physical images into an aesthetic whole. They value the charm of a literary work, fusing outer nature and inner thought.

"A lovely landscape does not appeal only by the agreeable sensations that it inspires, but by the ideas that it awakens" (Rodin, 2019, p. 166). Rodin's (2019) aesthetic concept is in sync with Croce's (2017) "collective suggestion" (p.99). As a three-dimensional literati painting and poem, gardens in South of the Yangtze River are small but indicate far-reaching aesthetic conceptions. The poetic imagination and spiritual enlightenment in these gardens have become a kind of "life gene" in Chinese culture and have long been crystallized into the literary personality and beliefs of the Chinese nation. Poetry is a crucial component in the gardening system, the poet Xun Qian expressed his admiration for the Master-of-Nets Garden, "Swallows dance merrily in the leafy glades, and plum blossoms are gently revealed by the melting snow on a sunny day." Similarly, "Small as it is, it comprises inexhaustible interest; close as it is to the downtown, it pushes worldly cares into the distance." Daxin Qian conveyed, in plain and simple language, a message that is not lacking in breadth or profundity and to create a deep and subtle, rich and far-reaching effect. It makes a big difference to the gardens in South of the Yangtze River with or without the literature or poetry. Without the "collective suggestion" brimming with literary value, the garden would not be forever remembered and eulogized, and much less attract visitors to revel in the beauty or even chant or compose as well.

Furthermore, it can be observed that the function of garden literature is not only to describe the architecture and write scenery but also to express aspirations and record events. The stone monument is a typical example of garden literature. For example, the Memorial Temple of Five Hundred Famous Sages in the Surging Waves Pavilion was engraved with portraits and profiles of virtuous local celebrities in successive dynasties. In general, classical Chinese gardens enrich the spiritual connotations and increase the storage of poetic information. It is not only a kind of decoration or accessory, but more importantly, it is an aesthetic state in which an artist creates a poetic image, and a tourist appreciates it with emotion and understanding. The culmination of such an experience is joy and satisfaction derived from the perfect

harmony between the human heart and its surrounding.

Gardens Become Widely Known by Poetry, and Everything Is Poetry

There is a thought of artistic generalization in the history of classical Chinese aesthetics, manifested on two levels. First of all, it is widely accepted that an art is regarded as another art to be commented on and appreciated, emphasizing the complementary essence between the two. When enjoying the garden, “the appreciation of the standard” which gardens are perceived as gardens is shown, and besides, there is “the thought of *Anderaatreben*” in which gardens are viewed as poetry, painting, and music likewise. As mentioned, the ancient Chinese scholars who fused outer nature and inner thought when building gardens did not stick to the recreation of a particular poem, nor merely inscribing by picking up a certain poetic charm, but rather objectified the generalized ideas of literature. In *Yuanye (Craft of Gardens)*, Cheng Ji wrote a famous remark, “When the moon shines brightly, the lute and books on the couch are disturbed, and the reflections of the moon in the pool are broken. The breeze is so refreshing that it makes you feel relaxed and open-minded, even afflictions and confusions are all released.” Not only does every word describe the attractive scenery, but it also embodies poetic feelings. Therefore, at this time compiling the history of Chinese classical gardens, which garden can not be organized into a thick literary collection with the theme of idyllic life?

Meanwhile, there is another way of thinking about garden literature. As Xie Liu said in *Wenxindiaolong (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons)*, “Literary changes are affected by the ways of the world. A literary style’s rise and decline in popularity are caused by changes of the time.” It is generally known that social dynamics and personal circumstances will have a significant impact on the rise and fall of gardens. No garden builder would like to watch his own work occupied by others or disappear rapidly. If concrete gardens are impossible to be preserved permanently, keeping a spiritual record written in words is much more eternal, such as Biaojia Qi’s Yu Garden and Mei Yuan’s Sui Garden. This kind of garden is not famous for its spectacular scale and picturesque scenery, but for realizing self-transcendence by directly pursuing poems from great scholars. Some people who have never actually visited will learn about the general structure and fascinating scenery through their imagination

after reading, which raises the artistic appeal and heritage value of the gardens. In addition to this social effect of “cultural transmission in time,” garden literature also presents the effect of time extension, i.e. “cultural transmission in the future,” which is in connection with the ancient Chinese literati’s lifelong pursuit of “eternity.” Gardens in South of the Yangtze River are not only the tangible riches of the owners but are also supposed to be handed down from generations by means of the continuation of spiritual implications. The scholars of the Ming-Qing period were well aware of this. When Yong Han was invited to inscribe, the garden he wrote was expected to be popularized and extolled like the gardens of Du Pei and Juyi Bai. It is an apparent clue that the purpose of garden construction was more than just for living and enjoyment, but for heritage and perpetuation.

The first idea of artistic generalization is summarized above, where gardens have been transferred from the entity to the continuation on paper, from transmission to the descendants to the future development of literary theory. In contrast, the second aesthetic notion is much more border, taking everything in the world as art to be greatly admired. Generally speaking, it is hard for ordinary people or poor scholars who could not afford to build to enjoy the pleasure of the scenery and write about the gardens. However, this was not the case with the scholars of the Ming-Qing period. Even if they did not own any garden or land, they were free to savor gardens and write for them. For example, when seeing friends busy with garden construction all day, Yong Qian in the Qing Dynasty argued that it would be more economical and light-hearted to visit others gardens. In case something unexpected happened in the future, the garden could not be enjoyed alone after all, but given to someone else. Instead of resenting the dilemma, he wrote *Lüyuanconghua (Collected Writings on the Study of Calligraphy)* at Lü Garden with great enthusiasm. After enumerating the merits and shortcomings of gardens, he put forward the predominant theory that “Building a garden is like writing a poem. It must be structured according to the rules.” Besides, Shilong Liu in the Ming Dynasty was also in agreement that the source of happiness was creating a garden on paper more than on the ground. His *Wuyouyuanji (Notes on the Wuyou Garden)* is a highly detailed discussion on the landscape and architecture of the Wuyou Garden. In his view, the essence of “Wuyou” refers to the traditional meaning of having nothing, but also possessing everything! The Ming and Qing literati wrote unique imagery in the world of literature and avoided untold suffering in the world of fiction. The spiritual gardens made on paper are weatherproof and

imaginative. They will be preserved longer than the concrete gardens, without the burden of the economy or the judgment of morality. So far, when it comes to garden literature, it is no longer an archive for further study nor an expression of personal sentiment. It has already existed independently from the physical gardens and built a spiritual world beyond the material ones.

As a result, it is not a privilege for the social elite to build a garden. The emergence and prosperity of garden literature made it possible for the poor like Shilong Liu to experience pleasure from expectation to satisfaction in spiritual gardens. For the great scholars, the gardens lead a quiet, peaceful life without greed for fame and fortune, which plays a positive role in demonstrating their virtue and establishing their repute; while for the ordinary people, the gardens are a perfect home to live in, devoting to intrapersonal affluence, elegance, and calmness beyond the necessities of life. Both the scenery of gardens and the expression of literature are excellent guidance for us to appreciate the sentiments that transcend architecture, afflictions, and even the mortal world. Otherwise, the gardens would not be able to bring so much literature together, let alone present such an approximate but distinct aesthetic connotation.

Conclusion

Gardens in South of the Yangtze River are a comprehensive system of cultural psychology of the ancient scholars and the unique value of the Chinese nation. The intrinsic relationship between gardens and literature, from “engraving the ancient, recounting the old, and gardens are the home of poetry,” to “literature brings virtue, and poetry creates the artistic conception of gardens,” to “gardens get well-known through poetry, and everything is poetry.” At this time, the innate character of gardens has risen from an objective concrete construction to a subjective spiritual succession. The charm of literature is not limited to the written word itself, but with the integration of other artistic disciplines to enhance the aesthetic interest and heart-to-heart communication; the visionary world of the gardens is more significant than the scenery, but also in the exploration and pursuit of cultural connotations. It is literature that builds such a monument to store eternal memories and gather exuberant vitality. It also along with the remaining and surviving gardens, keeps inspiring the construction of new tangible or intangible gardens. Once the spiritual garden is molded, it will become the direct agent of

the garden sentiment and provides a framework of theoretical guidance for the development of literature in modern times.

In a literal sense, the garden literature with pens and paper has never contributed a single brick or tile to the gardens. Nevertheless, the literati extradited the concrete garden to the spiritual world as Yingji Wu said in *Zanyuanji (Notes on the Zan Garden)*, “When the heart reaches to the gardens, it is not really necessary to build a physical one, for our own spiritual garden is the eternal soul habitat.” In other words, the literary perspective on the aesthetics of gardens in South of the Yangtze River is definitely more than breathtaking views and elaborate design, but providing a cozy home that may be affluent or thrifty, large or small, to dwell in poetically. Only in this way will garden literature develop a sense of belonging, realize spiritual achievements about gardens and moreover about literature, and turn into a great masterpiece imparting a high degree of unity to cultural attainments, creative technique, as well as literary imagery.

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