

Nature Based Layout of Chinese Traditional Painting and Classical Garden Making: A Case Study of the Master-of-Nets Garden

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Abstract: As a specific discipline of traditional arts in China, the literati painting has a close relationship with the classical garden-design, where we can see idea and technique of paintings in the garden and find gardens drawn in the painting. In fact, the traditional painting has been influencing garden making until now in China, especially painting in the bird's-eye view. Looking into the bird's-eye view of the Master-of-nets Garden, the article interprets 3 aspects of connections in between them. They are the commonality in ideology, the Subjective Initiative during composing and design, and the Layout Management method. Therefore, suggestions for the conservation of classical gardens and the building of modern garden landscape are provided.

Keywords: Chinese Traditional Painting; Garden Making; The Master-of-Nets Garden; Subjective Initiative; Layout Management

Foreword

The Chinese traditional paintings and the classical gardens, which are typical Chinese cultural heritage, have been rich and diverse in research throughout centuries. Concerning the literati garden, Ji Cheng's (b.1582) *The Craft of Gardens* (c.1630-1635), Liu Tun-Chen's (1897-1968) *Chinese Classical Gardens of Suzhou* (Suzhou Gu Dian Yuan Lin, 1979) and Yang Hongxun's (1931-2016) *A Treatise on the Gardens of Jiangnan* (2011) are included^[1-4]. As for the Chinese traditional painting, there are Jing Hao's (c.850-911) *Record of Brush Methods* (Bifaji c.923-936)^[5, 6], Guo Xi's (c.1000-1090) the *Corpus of Exquisite Sentiment for Forests and Landscape* (Lin Quan Gao Zhi 1117)^[7] and Da Chongguang's (1623-1692) *HUA QUAN* (collections of paintings 1668)^[8]. On the other hand, *Garden Paintings in Old China* (2012)^[9] written by Gao Juhan (1926-2014), Sun Xiaoxiang's (1921-2018) *A Study Of The Theories Of Chinese Landscape Planting Related To The Composition Of Garden Design*^[10], Tong Ming's (1968-) *Gardens and Architecture* (2009)^[11], and the *Thirty-One Sceneries of the Humble Administrator's Garden* (2014)^[12] help us on studying the relationship between painting and garden building in history.

1. Commonality of the Traditional Chinese Painting and the Classical Garden

Alexander Pope, in 1734, suggested that 'all gardening is landscape painting'. While Tong Yao (1900-1983) believed that 'all painting is but garden making.' Gardens and paintings are both arts of shaping. They can create two-dimensional or three-dimensional images by certain materials and techniques, especially in the Chinese traditional landscape painting and the classical garden design, where many elements of nature guided by subjective thoughts are conveyed through planar and spatial media to create the image of nature.

Both gardens and paintings have common observation objects—mountains, water, clouds and plants in nature, artifacts such as architecture, paths, and travelers, etc. Just as an Chinese idiom says:” To prepare a draft by collecting all amazing mountains” or “the Taoism follows nature” . In the process of creation, both need to control, select, process, refine and reorganize nature as a whole, rather than just copy and reproduce the object. Therefore, Wang Wei (414-453), in early Southern Dynasty (420-589), emphasized in his *Depiction of Painting* (c.440)^[13] that " About painting, people just focus on the appearance. While the ancient paintings are different from mapping everything accurately. ... Originally, form and spirit are integrated, so it can change vividly, which is the result of the painter's subjective feelings acting on the objective landscape..." Ji Cheng also emphasized the need to examine the topography in the chapter of Construction in *The Craft of Gardens*, which is said that: ‘ingenious in taking advantage of the site and borrowed scenery, and exquisite in appropriate shape and scale.’

Both painting and garden making have the functions of relaxing spirit, eliminating agony, and increasing aesthetic feeling. Zong Bing (375-443), Southern Dynasty (420-589), once said in *Preface to Painting Landscapes* (c.430): "...then the eyes should also respond, the heart should also understand, should also be able to feel the spirit, and the spirit surpasses the rationale..."^[13], and Wang Wei (414-453) also emphasized the comforting function of painting as:” gazing autumn clouds, the spirit is flying; approaching spring breeze, the mind is blowing". It’s just like Ji Cheng mentioned :”intoxication is just like that...anxiety is dismissed...and...suddenly away from the world with inner peace".

2. Subjective Initiative in Traditional Painting and Classical Garden

2.1 Liberation of subjective: the establishment of the Form-spirit Theory

The origin and development of the Form-spirit Theory of traditional painting can be found in Gu Kaizhi's (348-409) proposal of "depicting spirit with form" and "obtain artistic understanding by migrating into subjective feelings to the objective" , as well as Su Dongpo's (1037-1101) "judging paintings by its similarity of form is just like children's experience". We can see that literati painters paid more attention to expressing feelings at the beginning, and further abstracted from the restriction of appearance of objects. Su Dongpo once praised Wang Wei’s poem-paintings as "paintings in the poem; and poems in the painting". It is found that the interaction of the poems and paintings strongly stimulated creative thinking in history. Painters in Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) Dynasties attached great importance to the expression of the painter's subjective emotions, and the creation of paintings focused on conveying the author's personality and spirit. In Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the idea of "putting joy into paintings" further downplayed the value of "shape and image" in painting and paid more attention to the humanistic nature of painting. After that, the painter was no longer enslaved by objects and was granted freedom of arts creation.

2.2 New ideology: painting into gardens

Since Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), ‘Painting Into Gardens’ has become a new ideology connecting Chinese Traditional Painting and Classical Garden design when literati and garden designers changed their predecessors' idea of particularly imitating nature. As a result of the literati's participation, Dong Qichang (1555-1636) clearly stated in *The Collection of Rongtai’s Works* (1630)^[14] that "Probably...your gardens can be painted, while my paintings can become gardens." He also emphasized that "the painter has learned from the ancients and has become a master better than before, then shall further take nature as the teacher". Besides, Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) participated in the construction of the Humble Administrator's Garden (c.1500) and accomplished the *Painting of the Humble Administrator's Garden* (1533)^[15].

The tradition of tracing the ancients has had far-reaching influence. The literati painters of almost the same period began with imitating the ancient artists, firstly learning from Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), and then learning from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). They sorted out the context of the landscape painting that had the greatest influence on garden building. Thereby, their skills reached a level of “hills and valleys all in the heart” . At the same time, the head of the Jiangnan literati also gave great affirmation to whom designed gardens with painting theory. They also praised their landscape for approaching the feelings of the paintings of famous artists such as Jing Hao (850-911) and Huang Gongwang

(1269-1354). Since then, using the artistic conception of painting to guide the garden building has made profound influence. Generally, it provides more choices for garden designers to absorb inspiration from nature and/or from the artistic ideology of painting.

2.3 Diverse means of viewing

The methods of observing nature in traditional painting and garden construction were constantly developing. During Southern Dynasty, Zong Bing (375-443) discovered that “with mathematics” painting can hold a big picture, which is the principle of the perspective view. Later, the idea “a thousand miles at a distance” was widely used in the spatial expression of landscape paintings. Guo Xi (c.1000-1090), Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), put forward two general techniques in his book the *Corpus of Exquisite Sentiment for Forests and Landscape* (1117), which are the viewing method of “Touring View” that shows scenes “step by step” and “facade by facade” and the “Three Far-reaching” method that abstracts different landforms and viewing angles as three kinds of images^[7], the “Pingyuan ” representing flat terrain, the “Gaoyuan ” on behalf of mountains and hills, and the “Shenyuan ” expressing valleys and cliffs. And Wang Bomin (1924-2013), in the *Seven Views of Chinese Landscape Painting* (“” 1980)^[16], believes that the painter can more easily express the endless landscapes such as rich and diverse sizes, distances, heights, and undulations, if different perspectives are integrated on one single painting.

Gardens have in-situ and in-motion viewing . After entering the garden, you walk from one scenic spot to another, walking while scenery changing , Climbing, or facing the water, or overlooking, or top viewing, dynamic and continuous composition of the scene is consistent with the diverse and unified way of the “Touring View” used in landscape paintings. Moreover, Ji Cheng also listed a variety of ways of view borrowing in his book. In particular, “Borrowing from a distance”, “borrowing from the top” and “borrowing from the lower side” are similar with the “Three Far-reaching” method^[7].

3. The Layout Management of top view of the Master-of-nets Garden

Due to the interpenetration of the design concepts of painting and garden making in ancient China, designers could actively grasp the big picture and dive deeper into the details than ever before. And in late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), “Painting into Gardens” had been popular in garden building activities. During the creation of gardens and paintings, the “Layout Management” ^[11] method is the priority. Summarizing the basic composition styles used by painters in the past dynasties, it is mainly about the form of “three-layer and two-stage ” , the composition in shape of “S” (S), and the form of the “edge and corner” . Additionally, the analysis is developed from the top view because it is conducive to overlooking the overall picture and managing the layout of the garden. Meanwhile, the top view is also convenient to cover the lower part of the garden.

3.1 Composition in the form of “Three-layer and Two-stage”

SHIH T’ao (1641-before1720) put forward the method of the “Three-layer and Two-stage” composition in *Friar Bitter-melon on painting* (c.1700)^[17]. The Three-layer refers to the ground, the plants, and the mountains, while the Two-stage means that the mountain erects on the top, the landscape below, and the cloud or water take the middle, which separates the painting into two stages. It is generally used for flat and distant scenes, watching from a top viewing angle and a certain height.

The representative of this composition is Ni Zan (1301-1374) in Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). *Taking House on the Zizhi Mountain* (c.1369)^[18] as an example (Figure. 1), In the bottom stage of the painting, the right side lies slope stones, miscellaneous trees, and a thatched cottage. The left side erects a giant stone and two staggered withered trees. These elements comprise the close landscape. In the middle landscape, the vast lake is replaced by a blank space. The top stage includes the mountains in the distant view. The “Three-layer and Two-stage” composition of this painting builds a simple, ethereal, and quiet environment. Insert figure 1 about here

Similarly, looking down from the top view of the Master-of-Nets Garden , it is a typical “Three-layer and Two-stage” composition, just like the painting composition we discussed above (Figure. 2). The southern part of the garden, known as

the Banquet and Entertainment Zone , consists of the Hall of Sweet Osmanthus Hillock , the Pursuing Tranquility Lodging (Daohe House) and the Music Room (Zither Room), which forms one stage and one layer of the “Three-layer and Two-stage” composition. In the middle there is a square pool as a division of the “Two-stage” and serve as the second layer of the “Three-layer” composition. The northern part of the garden, known as the reading area, consists of the Viewing Porch for Looking at Pines and Studying Paintings (Watching Pines & Appreciating Paintings Studio), the Veranda of the Slanting Bamboo Twig, and the Chapel of Accumulated Emptiness (Study of the Ethereal), which forms the other stage of the “Two-stage” and the third layer of the “Three-layer” composition. The interesting history of the garden is that the square shape of the pool was finally settled in Guangxu year (1875-1908), Late-Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), by Li Hongyi (1831-1885) and his son, who filled the original strip-shaped pool twice in east and west^[19]. Although they changed the original layout of the Master-of-nets Garden, it became a coincidence that the tradition of pool design before mid-Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) were mostly square-shaped. So, the Master-of-nets Garden ended up closer to the ancient gardens. Moreover, there is no plant in the pond, which makes the reflection of skylight more ethereal. The composition makes a great contrast by putting the "void" feeling of the pool and the "dense" feeling of the north and south stages together, so that the entire garden can better reflect the beauty of solemn, hollow, sparse and quiet, the aesthetic logic of the “Three-layer and Two-stage” composition. Insert figure 2 about here

3.2 Composition in form of the “Edge and Corner”

The “Edge and Corner” composition is typical landscape painting method in Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). It is innovated by Li Tang (1066-1150), and pushed to excellent by Ma Yuan (1140-1225), and Xia Gui (c.1195-1224). KE KU YAO LUN (1388)^[20] in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) said: "There are not many panoramic views. Small or steep peaks go straight up, but the top is not seen; or it is straight down, but its feet are not seen; Or the nearby trees are towering, but the distant mountains are low, and the boat is lonely. The water reflects the moon, and one person sits alone". Taking the Traveling in Autumn Mountains^[21] in Liu Songnian's (1131-1218) Landscapes of the Four Seasons^[22] (c.1200) (Figure. 3) as an example, the courtyard and buildings surrounded by walls, trees and rocks, located on the right side of the painting, and only a corner of a rock on the right place constitute the main body of the painting. In the yard, an old man is sitting alone cozy, while the servant is fetching water to boil some tea. Outside the main body, there is a small bridge leading to the distance on the left side of the painting where the large area is left blank. The “Edge and Corner” landscape is that the main scene of the painting is on one side or one corner, where a partial close-up depiction of the main body of the painting is carried out, while the other scenes are left blank in large areas of the picture, and the scenes are gradually faded away from near to distance. Insert figure 3 about here

In the north of the Master-of-Nets Garden, overlooking the south from the second floor of the Study of the Ethereal. The Hall of Sweet Osmanthus Hillock and the Tassel-washing Waterside Pavilion form the main body of the “Edge and Corner” composition. The rockery "Yun Gang" (Cloudy Mountain, artificial mountain), magnolia, sweet Osmanthus and maple trees on it, and the stone shore down below near the water surface form an important transition space where the main body in the picture attaches the water surface. Finally, the water surface of the rectangular pond in the distance is an important blank space in the “Edge and Corner” composition. The large amount of blank space in the picture highlights the beauty of the void, which leaves a lot of imagination for us. (Figure. 4). Insert figure 4 about here

3.3 Composition in a shape of “S”

Throughout the history, the "S"-shaped composition is one commonly used style of the basic ones. It refers to arranging the location of all parts in the picture to form an "S"-shaped twisting situation in the overview. Huang Binhong (1865-1955) said: "Where there is empty and white in entity, no matter the size, length, or width, it is necessary to not only connect the empty with each other, but also obtain the shape of the dancing dragon and phoenix."^[23] in his book Discourse on Landscape Painting (c.1700). It is consistent with techniques in traditional Chinese painting, such as “hidden or exposed”, “opened or closed”, “back or forward” . Of course, the shape of "S" is not only used in the overall structure of the painting, but also in

part of the picture. Not only can it be presented in visible form, but also in virtual form. That is the so-called "the pen stops while the picture continues expanding" .

For example, in *Immortal Realm of the Peach Spring* (c.1550) ^[24](Figure. 5), Qiu Ying (c.1498-1552), Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), painted the ridges in the picture from bottom to top, and from near to distance, and the blank space and clouds in the picture shows the "S" shape, which moves through the entire fore-scene, mid-scene and back-scene. Insert figure 5 about here

Back in the layout of the Master-of-nets Garden, it has more about twists and turns. Because the tortuous layout of "S" shape can not only increase the depth of the scene and enrich the types of the scene, but also avoid unobstructed views, increase the length of the touring route in the garden and prolong the viewing time. The Banquet and Entertainment Zone in the south of the Master-of-nets Garden is flexibly enclosed in a shape of “S” by different sizes of three groups of buildings, which are the south façade of the Hall of Sweet Osmanthus Hillock, the east façade of Pursuing Tranquility Lodging and the back façade of the Tassel-washing Waterside Pavilion (see Figure 2). At the same time, the side corridor of the Hall of Sweet Osmanthus Hillock connects another corridor in the enclosed space, and further strengthens the layout of the "S"-shaped path. Interspersed rockeries and plants at the opposite or side position of the trail, hidden or exposed, strengthen the depth of the garden scene.

4. Concluding remarks

The Chinese Traditional Painting and the Classical Garden Making have many commonalities in understanding and recreating nature. From theory, idea to technique, the Chinese Traditional Painting have profoundly influenced the Classical Garden Making. Using the artistic conception in painting theory to guide the design and construction of gardens has become a new ideology since hundreds of years ago.

Layout Management is the primary concern of painting and garden design. Both overall layout and partial design of gardens can be analyzed by means of the Eye of Painting to obtain inspirations of the Classical Garden and to guide creative method of garden making.

Looking into the Chinese history, the Traditional Painting and the Classical Garden making are glorious treasure of the ancient Chinese culture, and there is still more nutrients that can be absorbed by modern arts creation and space design.

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Figures



Figure. 1 House on the Zizhi Mountain

From: <https://www.ltfc.net/img/60213b41a7e6427598891fa6>

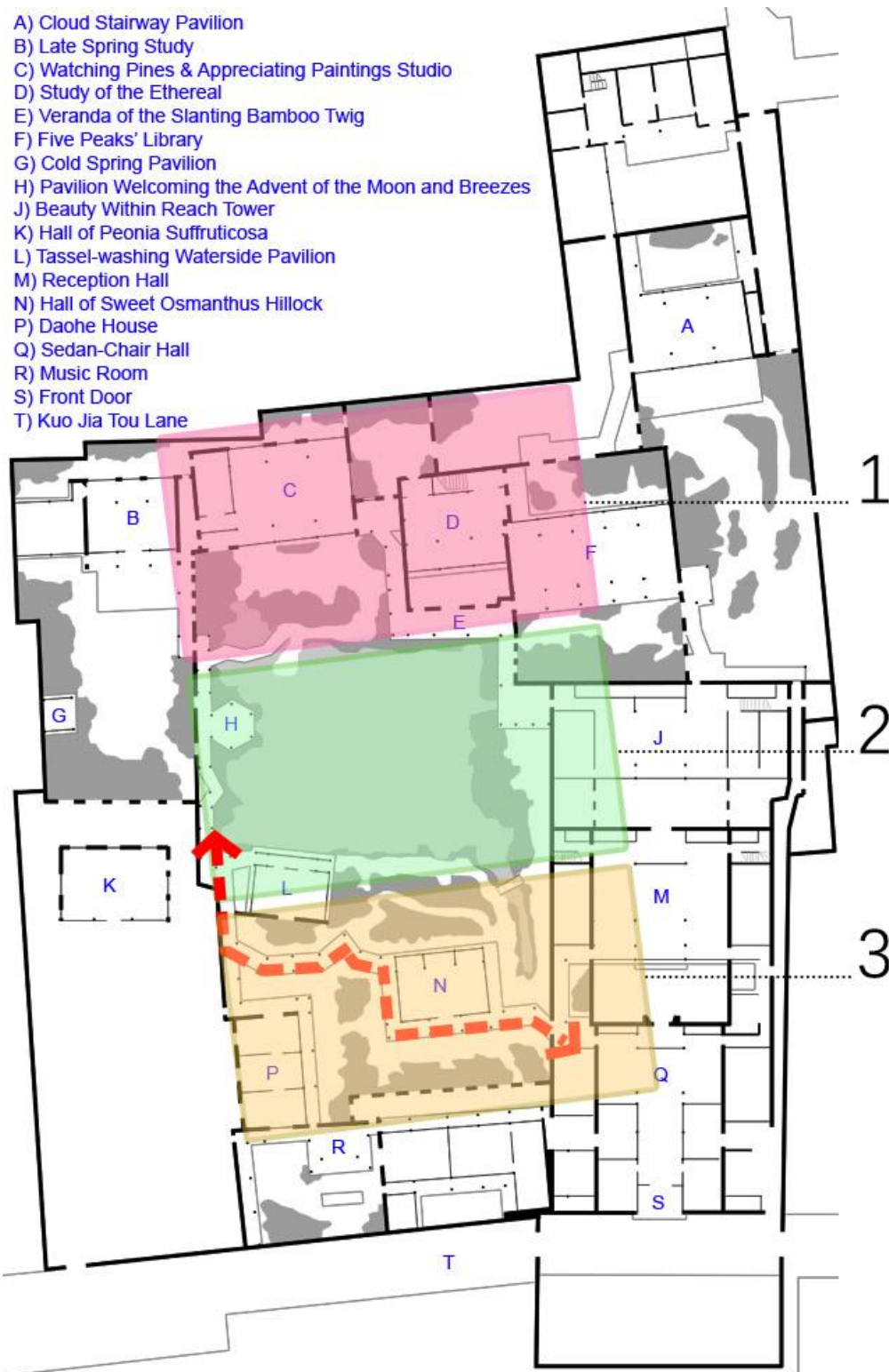


Figure. 2 Three layers and Two stages, the Banquet and Entertainment Zone contains a trail of “S” shape the Master-of-Nets Garden



Figure. 3 Traveling in Autumn Mountains, Landscapes of the Four Seasons
From <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/234462.html>

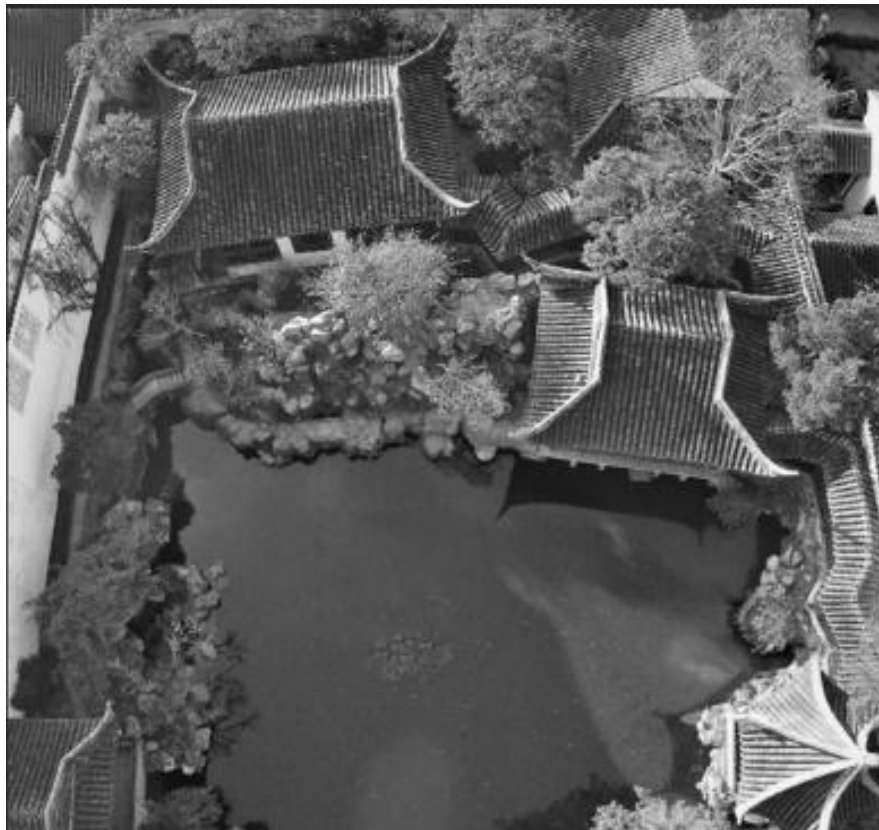


Figure. 4 South-toward top view from 2F of the Ji Xu Pavilion, the Master-of-Nets Garden
Shot from <https://mallwap.szyilly.com/vr/WSYVR/Panorama/Pc/>



Figure. 5 Immortal Realm of the Peach Spring
From <http://www.chinashj.com/sh-gdhh-md/497.html>

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