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Garden Sentiments of Ancient Chinese Literati: An Exploration of Botanical Aesthetic Concepts in The Craft of Gardens (Yuan Ye)

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Article

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Abstract

Plants play a vital role in the aesthetics of classical Chinese gardens. Ji Cheng's Yuan Ye (The Craft of Gardens) provides a systematic theory of garden design, emphasizing the significance of plants. This study examines 24 plant species in Yuan Ye, analyzing their landscape concepts and cultural symbolism. By exploring Ji Cheng's experiences and historical context, it reveals the tension between literati ideals and the disillusionment of unrecognized talent. Through a cross-textual analysis of Yuan Ye, classical poetry, and garden paintings, the research investigates the symbolic meanings of pine, bamboo, and plum in moral virtues and chrysanthemums in reclusion. It also defines the aesthetic characteristics of plant landscapes in classical gardens. The findings demonstrate that plants not only enhance the garden environment but also convey profound cultural symbolism and literati sentiments. Ancient literati expressed virtues and emotions through garden plants, seeking spiritual refuge and cultural identity. This study provides a new perspective on classical garden aesthetics and offers insights for modern garden design, highlighting the enduring cultural significance of plant landscapes.

Introduction

As Suzhou gardens, emblematic of traditional Chinese landscape design, have been recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, there has been a growing focus on the protection and study of classical Chinese gardens both domestically and internationally (UNESCO World Heritage Centre n.d.). However, much of this attention has been directed toward the preservation of the physical structures and innovations in garden design, often overlooking the profound cultural meanings and philosophical underpinnings embedded within these spaces (Wu and Kerridge, 2015). Classical Chinese garden art is distinguished by its unique aesthetic qualities and its deep integration with cultural traditions, especially in the context of Chinese literature and philosophy. These gardens serve not only as expressions of aesthetic beauty but also as tangible manifestations of the intellectual and emotional pursuits of the literati.

In particular, Ji Cheng, a renowned garden designer from the Ming dynasty, emphasized in his treatise *The Craft of Gardens* (*Yuan Ye*) the vital role of plants in achieving harmony and balance within garden aesthetics. This work, regarded as a fundamental text in the study of classical garden design, goes beyond mere horticultural technique to reflect the literati's spiritual and cultural ideals (Yang, 2012). Through the selection of plants such as pine, bamboo, and plum, Ji Cheng symbolically expressed virtues of resilience, integrity, and purity, which were highly valued by Chinese scholars (Zhou, 1999). These plants were not selected solely for their visual appeal but for their embodiment of moral virtues that resonated deeply within the literati tradition. Moreover, the symbolic role of plants like the chrysanthemum, associated with the emotion of frustrated talent, highlights the complex

relationship between the individual and society in ancient China. The aesthetic appreciation of such plants was intertwined with the intellectual and emotional struggles of the literati, whose gardens became sanctuaries of personal reflection and artistic expression (Chen, 1990). In this way, the garden became a microcosm of the literati's worldview, where nature, art, and philosophy converged.

This study seeks to examine the interplay between plant aesthetics and literati sentiments as presented in *Yuan Ye* through a detailed review of both historical and theoretical frameworks. By analyzing Ji Cheng's life and the cultural context in which he composed *Yuan Ye*, this research aims to reveal the internal contradictions faced by the literati, particularly in their pursuit of solitude and intellectual fulfillment. Through a systematic analysis of the plant elements featured in *Yuan Ye*, the study further explores the design principles that governed the creation of botanical landscapes, paying special attention to the cultural and symbolic significance of key plant species in Chinese gardens. The discussion will culminate in a broader reflection on the aesthetic characteristics of botanical landscapes in Chinese garden design, demonstrating how these spaces function as embodiments of the literati's intellectual and emotional ideals. Ultimately, the research not only deepens our understanding of plant aesthetics in Chinese gardens but also offers insights for modern landscape design, where traditional cultural values can continue to inform contemporary practice.

Research methodology

Theoretical methods and framework

This study employs a comprehensive approach integrating theories of plant imagery in classical Chinese poetry, along with a literature review, textual analysis, and statistical induction methods, to analyze plant imagery in classical Chinese poetry and the botanical landscape concepts in *Yuan Ye*. Additionally, classical Chinese garden aesthetics theory is applied in conjunction with the aforementioned statistical and analytical methods to explore the poetic expression in garden plant design.

Literature Review Method: This method involves reading a large number of classical poetry works to gather and organize information on plant imagery in classical Chinese poetry, providing a solid theoretical foundation for the interpretation of the paper's viewpoints.

Textual Analysis Method: Guided by the aforementioned theories, this method analyzes the text of *Yuan Ye* and interprets botanical landscape cases to explore the intertextuality with plant imagery in classical Chinese poetry.

Statistical Induction Method: This method classifies all botanical landscapes mentioned in *Yuan Ye*, recording each plant's category, name, and the corresponding design schemes. This provides a foundation for subsequent analysis of intertextuality.

Comparative Study Method: Based on textual analysis, this study will compare representative illustrations such as *The Tang Poems Catalogue of Paintings* (Huang, 1982), to visually confirm the intertextuality between plant imagery and the concepts of botanical landscapes.

Research object and terminology

Yuan Ye *(The Craft of Gardens)* authored by Ji Cheng (1582–1642, a garden designer during the Ming Dynasty), is the first comprehensive and systematic treatise on garden design in Chinese history (Wei, 1997). It presents the wisdom and artistic pursuits of ancient garden creation from various perspectives, including site selection, planning, architectural design, rockery, water features, paving, stone selection, and scenic borrowing. With its profound influence on garden development and significant research value, *Yuan Ye* is divided into three volumes with 235 illustrations. The first volume covers the theories of garden construction, garden discussions, site analysis, building foundations, and design details. The second volume mainly summarizes the styles of railings. The third volume includes articles on doors and windows, walls, paving, rockery, stone selection, and scenic borrowing. Considering the academic standing of the society for research in Chinese architecture (a private academic organization active from the 1930s to the 1940s, specializing in the research and preservation of traditional Chinese architecture), this paper primarily examines the Chinese text of 1933 edition of *Yuan Ye* by Ji Cheng, republished by the Youwen Pavilion Bookstore in Dalian in the 22nd year of the Republic of China (Ji, 1933). The aim is to present the aesthetic ideas of *Yuan Ye* to the greatest extent possible. For the English text, the study will refer to *The Craft of Gardens* (the English version of *Yuan Ye*) by Aison Hardie (Ji, 1988).

Classical Chinese Gardens as part of classical Chinese culture, the development of Chinese gardens spans over a thousand years. It has undergone five main periods (Zhou, 2008): The Shang and Zhou periods marked the embryonic stage of gardens, primarily focused on hunting with some leisure activities. During the Qin and Han periods, gardens evolved from traditional hunting parks into imperial gardens, combining with palaces and emphasizing grandeur. The period from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang dynasties saw a leap in garden development, characterized by natural landscapes and poetic themes reflecting the literati's pursuit of nature. From the Song and Yuan to the early Ming periods, gardens focused on the essence of natural landscapes and subtle, profound aesthetics, with numerous garden writings emerging. The Ming and Qing

dynasties represented another peak in garden development, with the Qing Dynasty's Kangxi (1654-1722 CE) and Qianlong (1711-1799 CE) eras being particularly active, resulting in many royal gardens like the Old Summer Palace and Changchun Garden. The rise of private gardens also brought new vitality to garden development, with notable examples such as the Zhuozheng Garden and the Jichang Garden. Garden construction techniques matured, and numerous works on garden design, including Wen Zhenheng (1470-1559 CE)'s *Treatise on Superfluous Things* and Ji Cheng's *Yuan Ye*, emerged.

Ancient Chinese Literati, originating from the term "shi" (scholar-official) which first appeared on the historical stage during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BCE), gradually evolved into a class characterized by high literary cultivation, expertise in poetry, painting, music, and history, and held a prominent social status (Su, 2008). The literati class can be divided into two types: those who achieved high positions in the officialdom and had a significant impact on social reforms and developments, and those who, disillusioned with official politics or unable to pursue an official career, devoted themselves to nature and poetry. As for the latter group of literati, they often displayed a complex contradiction. On the one hand, they harbored a strong sense of patriotism and ambition to contribute to society; on the other hand, the harsh reality of their unfulfilled aspirations forced them to adopt a reclusive philosophy of retreating to pastoral life. The Wei-Jin period (220-589 CE) was marked by the latter group, known as recluses, while the Ming Dynasty saw a rise in "city-recluse" literati due to urban prosperity and the difficulty of secluded life (Zhou and Zhou, 2018). These literati, though living in the mundane world, created refined living environments with flowers, plants, and elegant objects. This paper consistently uses "literati" as the research term. In the cited literature, the original terms used by the authors or translators are retained, including "scholar" and "gentleman."

The contradiction of ancient Chinese literati as represented by Ji Cheng

Ji Cheng's creation of *Yuan Ye* was deeply rooted in his personal experiences, aspirations, and circumstances. In his youth, Ji Cheng traveled extensively across various regions of China, immersing himself in the natural landscapes and gaining inspiration from the mountains and rivers he encountered. Upon returning to his hometown in middle age, Ji Cheng began to engage in garden construction, drawing from his rich experiences with nature and his literary and artistic talents. On one hand, this was to meet the needs of daily living, but at the same time, writing books could provide some income. While Ji Cheng initially turned to garden design as a livelihood, his broader ambitions as a scholar and artist were not stifled by material concerns (Song, 2019). He approached garden design not only as a craft but as a medium for expressing the ideals and aspirations of a cultured literati. His work incorporated both the technical skills and methods of garden construction and the artistic and intellectual sensibilities that extended beyond the

physical realm of the garden. In *Yuan Ye*, Ji Cheng presents a vision of garden design that reflects both his deep experience in the craft and his literary and artistic inclinations. His garden design is thus a synthesis of practical expertise and cultural expression, aimed at creating landscapes that resonate with the ideals of literati and poets. Ji Cheng embodies the inherent contradiction prevalent among ancient Chinese literati between engagement with the external world and the pursuit of inner spiritual fulfillment. On one hand, he represents a worldly ethos, striving to contribute to society; on the other, he reflects a transcendent perspective, returning to his hometown to cultivate gardens when his ambitions for an official career remain unrealized, finding solace and joy in the simplicity of rural life.

The composition of *Yuan Ye* reflects Ji Cheng's cultural awareness and sense of responsibility as a Chinese literatus. In the concluding passages, he articulates, "In my youth I had a deep interest in woodlands. For a long time, I made a living from landscape gardening... So I have had it printed and published for the benefit of society [Afterword] (Ji, 1988: 122)." As a literati garden designer, Ji Cheng exhibits confidence in his abilities, supported by extensive travel that enriches his understanding of garden art, aesthetics, and spiritual essence. Furthermore, he adeptly translates his inner visions into concrete designs and theoretical writings, aspiring to inspire and assist both contemporary society and future generations. His concerns expressed in the opening of *Yuan Ye* are particularly telling: "I too was afraid that my achievements would be swept away on the tide of history, so l have illustrated my designs in the following text, to be shared by fellow-enthusiasts [The Theory of Construction] (Ji, 1988: 40)." This highlights his intent to preserve traditional techniques and his lament over their potential decline, revealing a broad vision and commitment to cultural responsibility. Thus, the intrinsic mechanism of Ji Cheng's *Yuan Ye* lies in the embodiment of his aspirations and ambitions through the art of garden creation.

Yuan Ye also reflects the transcendent practices of Chinese literati who feel overlooked. Ji Cheng laments: "I had been through many stormy experiences, and was already tired of my wanderings in the course of my profession. I sighed to myself that I was born at the wrong time [Afterword] (Ji, 1988: 122)." This sentiment underscores his recognition of the challenges faced by many of his contemporaries, leading him to immerse himself in garden creation while articulating his philosophies in *Yuan Ye*.

The contradictions inherent in ancient Chinese literati are meticulously illustrated in Ji Cheng's *Yuan Ye*, transforming classical Chinese gardens from mere architectural constructs into spaces that embody the spirit of literati culture. Similarly, classical Chinese poetry transcends simple text, evolving into a profound medium for the emotional and spiritual expression of its creators.

Plant elements and conception of botanical landscapes in *Yuan Ye*

Since the Ming Dynasty, classical Chinese art entered a period of maturity and synthesis (Zhou, 2008), characterized by distinct formalization, which is also evident in garden art. To explore the beauty of plants in classical gardens based on *Yuan Ye*, it is essential to start from the formal design of botanical landscapes, comprehending the cultural semantics of plants from a macro perspective and uncovering the core of garden aesthetics through their external forms (Hu and Zheng, 2018).

Yuan Ye imbues the creation of botanical landscapes with the subjective agency of the literati, linking botanical landscape design with emotions and artistic conception, reflecting the literati's conscious cultural aspirations through the blending of objects (flowers and trees) and emotions (subjective feelings). Ji Cheng did not dedicate a specific chapter solely to plants; instead, he scattered his discussions on plants throughout the general discourse and various sections. This intentional structuring integrates plants into the broader conceptual framework of garden-making and essential elements of garden construction, examining the configuration of plants within each of these elements. Ji Cheng dynamically displays plants in relation to various locations, such as buildings, garden walls, mountains and water, and terraces and pavilions. Depending on their location and the structural or functional roles they play in landscaping, plants exhibit diverse functional characteristics.

Yuan Ye consists of three volumes, covering nearly all aspects of classical garden construction, yet it does not feature a specific chapter dedicated to plants. However, this does not imply that Ji Cheng overlooked the role of plants in garden design; rather, through phrases like “The hidden significance of mountains and forests needs deep study, whereas the temperament of flowers and trees is easy to grasp [Raising Mountains] (Ji, 1988: 107),” he vividly expresses the profound bond between Chinese literati and flora. This not only highlights the emotional attributes of plants but also reflects the author's deep understanding of the history of Chinese garden and plant culture since the *Book of Songs*. It fully underscores the important role of plants and their aesthetic imagery in Chinese classical garden aesthetics. According to statistics, *Yuan Ye* mentions approximately 24 types of plants, covering flowers, trees, vines, grasses, and other plant types (Table 1).

Table 1 Plant Elements and Botanical Landscape Conception in *Yuan Ye*

No.	Plant Elements in *Yuan Ye*			Design Conception of Botanical Landscapes in *Yuan Ye*
	Designations in *Yuan Ye*	Common Names	Scientific Names	
1	Mei	Plum blossom	*Prunus mume*	**Plum trees** around the buildings [On Gardens]
2	He	Lotus	*Nelumbo nucifera*	A ten-mile expanse of **lotuses** in the breeze wafts its fragrance to your hidden study [Layout]
3	Guizi	Osmanthus	*Osmanthus fragrans*	Imperceptibly a heavenly fragrance steals around as the **osmanthus** seeds sadly fall [Making Use of Natural Scenery]
4	Shaoyao	Peony	*Paeonia lactiflora*	**Peonies** may be grown against a trellis [Urban Sites]
5	Qiangwei	Rose	*Rosa spp.*	**Roses** should not have a support [Urban Sites]
6	Ju	Chrysanthemum	*Chrysanthemum morifolium*	Weave a wattle fence and grow **chrysanthemums** [Layout]; Beside the withered hedge the **chrysanthemum flowers** are over [Making Use of Natural Scenery]
7	Zhu/Huang/ Jun/Yu	Bamboo	*Bambusoideae spp.*	The path through the **bamboos** leads into the unknown [Sites Among Mountain Forests]; Find a secluded place to which to transplant **bamboo** [Layout];Transplant some **bamboos** in front of your window [On Gardens]; Entertain your guests deep among the **bamboos** [Sites in Uninhabited Countryside]
8	Liu	Willow	*Salix spp.*	**Willows** should be set along the embankments [On Gardens];

				Embankments are suitable for **willow-trees** [Urban Sites]
9	Song/ Songbai	Pine	*Pinus spp.*	The **pinewood** retreat is hidden away [Sites Among Mountain Forests]; On the twisting cliffs the thick gnarled roots of **pines** [Urban Sites]; The rocks should be planted with **pines** from Huangshan, ancient plum trees and fine bamboo [Raising Mountains]
10	Wu/ Wutong	Pheonix trees / Paulownia trees	*Firmiana simplex / Paulownia tomentosa*	Extensive courtyards can be planted with **pheonix trees** [Urban Sites]; The shadow of **phoenix trees** should cover the ground [On Gardens]; Open-sided pavilions may be shaded by **paulownia** trees [Urban Sites]
11	Bajiao/jiao	Plantain	*Plantago major*	Beyond the half-open window lies the emerald shade of **plantains** and paulownias [Making Use of Natural Scenery]; Through an open window one can see the delicate shadows of **plantain leaves** [Urban Sites]
12	Tao	Peach	*Prunus persica*	Paths will develop naturally among the **peach** and **plum trees** [Village sites]
13	Li	Plum	*Prunus domestica*	
14	Huai	Pagoda tree	*Styphnolobium japonicum*	The shade of **pagoda trees** pattern the walls [On Gardens]
15	Li	Pear	*Pyrus spp.*	Set aside some **pear trees** to form a courtyard [On Gardens]
16	Feng	Maple	*Acer spp.*	Rank upon rank of crimson **maples** flushed with wine [Making Use of Natural Scenery]
17	Sangma	Mulberry and Jute	*Morus alba and Corchorus capsularis*	surrounded by wattle fences, with **mulberry** and **jute** growing

				everywhere [Village sites]
18	Baipin	White duckweed	*Lemna minor*	Among the **white duckweed** and **red polygonum**, focks of gulls will gather beside your jetty [On Gardens]
19	Hongliao	Red polygonum	*Polygonum orientale*	
20	Lu	Reeds	*Phragmites australis*	On the banks of rivers and the shores of lakes, beyond the dense willows and sparse **reeds**, a few small, neat cottages can make a fine sight [River and Lakeside Sites]
21	Xisun	Irises	*Iris tectorum*	Have **irises** planted in their (Kunshan rocks) interstices [Selection of Rocks]
22	Lanzhi/Lan	Orchid and Angelica	*Orchidaceae spp.*	Where there is a mountain torrent one may cultivate **orchids** and **angelica** together [On Gardens]
23	Tai	Moss	*Bryum argenteum*	A winding path should go round by the fence, with the **moss trodden down** where the garden-boy has swept the leaves [Village sites]
24	Luobi/Luo	Climbing plants: Vines, Creepers	*Vitis spp. (Common Creeper), Ficus pumila (Climbing Fig)*	The surrounding wall should be concealed under **creepers**, and rooftops should emerge here and there above the tops of the trees [On Gardens]; **Vines** and **creepers** spread their turquoise over the surrounding wall [Making Use of Natural Scenery]

Ji Cheng’s integration of plant management and landscape design allows readers to experience the unique visual and situational representations he created. These plantings, dispersed across various theoretical and technical discussions, evoke a sense of imagination and emotional resonance with the garden space and its ambiance. This imaginative and perceptual tension is the ultimate goal of garden-making and reflects the spiritual needs of both the garden creators and its admirers. Ji Cheng’s distinctive garden

theory lies in blending theoretical and practical techniques into a language rich in landscape imagery centered on plant management.

The vivid descriptions of botanical landscapes throughout the text carry Ji Cheng's purpose and intent—his focus on and emphasis on the literary and emotional aspects of the literati. Through his landscape design, Ji Cheng enables readers to perceive the unique imagery and scenarios of each botanical landscape. The clever design of these plants in various garden spots stimulates imagination about the spatial and emotional qualities of the garden. This spiritual imagination and realization represent the highest objective of garden-making and reflect the literati's (both creators and inhabitants or admirers of the garden) spiritual needs in the garden.

Ji Cheng upheld the literati's pursuit of spiritual dedication, affirming and venerating their cultural accumulation, aesthetic judgment, and emotional cultivation. His aim was to embody these qualities in garden design. *Yuan Ye* seeks to inspire imagination and recreation of garden aesthetics through the textual representation of plant imagery. Plants become the carriers of the literati's garden intentions, connecting elements such as bridges, buildings, pavilions, terraces, lofts, rocks, and water features. This integration of knowledge and emotional engagement allows for the creation and appreciation of gardens.

The embodiment of literati sentiments in botanical landscapes

Pine, bamboo and plum: The pursuit of noble virtues

In traditional Chinese aesthetics, associating certain characteristics of natural plants with human virtues and attributing corresponding personality traits to these plants is a significant aspect of literati thought (Li, 2010). For instance, the plum tree is celebrated for its steadfastness in the face of cold, the lotus for its purity despite growing in muddy waters, and the orchid for its elegant simplicity. Since before the Tang dynasty, pine, bamboo, and plum have been praised together, and with the rise of Song dynasty poetry and literati painting, these plants were increasingly used by literati and artists to symbolize virtues (Liu et al., 2015). By the late Ming dynasty, more literati and painters began to engage directly in garden design, placing greater emphasis on reflecting the spiritual essence of the garden.

The plant imagery in classical Chinese poetry, which employs expressing virtue through objects, has been adapted to courtyards for purposes such as inspiration, moral

encouragement, or blessing. Since the Song dynasty, the concept of pine, bamboo, and plum as the “Three Friends of Winter” or “three auspicious things” became popular among Chinese literati. These three plants are not only key representatives of ancient gentlemanly culture but also highly symbolic in Eastern aesthetics. They are important elements in garden design and frequently appear in classical poetry, forming a distinctive imagery system: pine symbolizes perseverance, longevity, and nobility; bamboo represents integrity and humility; and plum blossoms signify purity, resilience, and high moral character (Williams, 2012). In garden design, the planting of pine, bamboo, and plum is not merely for aesthetic appeal but also serves to convey the pursuit of noble virtues by ancient Chinese literati within the garden space. In *Yuan Ye*, Ji Cheng explicitly proposed the integration concept of pine, bamboo, and plum: “Paths should be lined with the ‘three auspicious things’ whose property it is to symbolize eternity [On Gardens] (Ji, 1988: 43).” Ji Cheng believed that only with these “three auspicious things” could a garden endure through time. This integration of plant symbolism into garden design and classical Chinese literature and art works provides a profound cultural and moral significance (Fig. 1).

In *Yuan Ye*, the depiction of pine landscapes such as “The pinewood retreat is hidden away [Sites Among Mountain Forests] (Ji, 1988: 46).” and “The hermit recites poetry in his pine-wood hut [Making Use of Natural Scenery] (Ji, 1988: 121) (Fig. 2 left).” uses the motif of pine twice to express the literati/hermit’s aspiration to avoid worldly impurities and to dwell amidst pines, unafraid of adversity. The integration of pine with garden design creates a space that combines emotional and symbolic perceptions. Furthermore, combining pine with mountain rocks in gardens highlights the unique characteristics of the pine, amplifying its symbolic connotations of resilience and strength through phrases like “on the twisting cliffs the thick gnarled roots of pines [Urban Sites] (Ji, 1988: 47).”

In *Yuan Ye*, expressions such as “the gentleman of leisure plucks his lute in a grove of bamboo [Making Use of Natural Scenery] (Ji, 1988: 121) (Fig. 2 right)” and “a thatched hut should be built among the bamboos [On Gardens] (Ji, 1988: 43)” convey the experience of enjoying solitude in a remote pavilion, likening it to the bamboo’s resilience in the wind. Achieving the bamboo’s virtue in the secular world is challenging, akin to the difficulty of constructing elaborate structures as noted that “it is comparatively easy to construct carved beams and soaring pillars, but it takes a long time to grow pagoda trees old enough to give real shade and bamboo groves like a mass of green jade [Situation] (Ji, 1988: 46).” A dense bamboo forest can be even more serene and secluded than a pine forest—“If you seek a secluded spot among banks of bamboo, intoxication will food your heart [On Gardens] (Ji, 1988: 43).” The phrases “with bamboo growing elegantly and trees flourishing, with shady willows and bright flowers [Sites Beside a Mansion House] (Ji, 1988; 51)” and “entertain your guests deep among the bamboos [Sites in Uninhabited Countryside] (Ji, 1988: 50).” convey the feeling of being surrounded by sages and virtuous men in the lush bamboo forest, temporarily forgetting the ups and downs of officialdom

and ill-fated luck. The resilience of bamboo becomes the driving force for persevering under burdens. At the same time, befriending others through bamboo symbolizes the hope that shared virtues will foster a refined cultural gathering among literati (Fig. 3 left).

In classical Chinese poetry, pine, bamboo, and plum often interact through “expressing virtue through objects,” forming deep cultural symbols. For instance, Wang Wei (692-761)’s lines “Among pine-trees bright moonbeams peer; Over crystal stones flows water clear (Xu, 2011: 80),” using the interplay of pine and moonlight to create a tranquil and lofty atmosphere. Wang Wei’s harmonious depiction of life reflects his yearning for a carefree and idyllic existence, while also contrasting his disdain for corrupt officialdom. Springs, green pines, bamboo, and green lotuses symbolize the poet’s noble character and the environment that supports his ideal state. Wang Wei’s inclination towards nature and his desire for a tranquil, simple pastoral life reflect his aversion to corrupt politics (Gao and Liu, 2022). This poem uses natural beauty to express the poet’s moral character and an ideal societal beauty. At first glance, this poem appears to simply depict the scenery with detailed and moving descriptions. In reality, the poet uses the portrayal of plants and landscapes as a means to convey deeper sentiments and aspirations.

The elegant imagery of pine and bamboo frequently appears in classical Chinese poetry. Song dynasty poet Su Shi (1037-1101)’s *Love for Bamboo* reaches an extreme, stating “Whereas one may eat a meal without meat, One cannot live at a place without bamboo. Without meat, one grows thin, Without bamboo, one becomes vulgar (Campbell, n.d.).” Su Shi contrasts material and spiritual values, suggesting that while missing out on tasty food may only lead to thinness, lacking the integrity and refinement of pine and bamboo results in vulgarity. This reflects both admiration for the lofty character and a warning to those lacking in virtue (Xu and Zhang, 2023). For Chinese literati, the most important qualities are ideological character and spiritual realm. They believe that possessing noble sentiments leads to the steadfastness of pines and cypress, the purity of plum and bamboo, and resilience in facing challenges. Conversely, those who pursue fame and profit, who are swayed by power, and who lack integrity, exhibit vulgar and despicable traits.

Plum blossoms are emblematic of resilience and purity, in classical Chinese poetry, symbolized by their ability to bloom despite the harsh winter. For instance, Wang Anshi (1021-1086)’s line “At the wall corner plum trees grow; Against the cold they bloom apart (Xu, 1994: 189).” illustrates the noble character of plum blossoms that persist through the winter. This poetic imagery, interwoven through allusion, extends beyond literature to influence garden design, serving as a source of inspiration for creating garden atmospheres. Besides being known as one of the “Three Friends of Winter,” the plum blossom also aligns with the late Ming Dynasty literati’s inclination towards reclusion and a life of integrity.

In *Yuan Ye*, the conception “Where the moonlight is dim and faint, plant bamboos beyond the plum trees around your lodging. In this way you can increase the mystery of the place and engulf yourself in an even deeper emotion [Sites in Uninhabited Countryside] (Ji, 1988: 50).” suggests that the placement of plum and bamboo around the house symbolizes the literati’s desire to maintain a pure and untainted space (Fig. 3 right). The faint, dim moonlight metaphorically represents the corrupt nature of society and officialdom, reflecting (the late Ming) literati’s reluctance to conform and their habit of using plum and bamboo to express their ideals. The expression “Looking for plum blossoms...You can entrust your purified body to the Dark and the Yellow, and then you need not consider your attitude towards other people [Sites Beside a Mansion House] (Ji, 1988: 53),” conveys the idea of entrusting one's humble self to nature. With inner purity, there is no need to be ensnared by political suspicion, using the plum blossom to express the sentiment of withdrawing from political fame and fortune, finding joy in reclusion.

Chrysanthemum: The reclusion of unrecognized talent

Chinese classical garden aesthetics not only seek material satisfaction and visual effects but also emphasize spiritual self-sufficiency. This aesthetic tradition is a key feature of botanical landscapes in classical Chinese gardens (Chen, 2013). The plant imagery in ancient poetry, like garden botanical landscapes, is not simply an arbitrary juxtaposition but reflects the ancient literati’s ideal of harmony between nature and humanity and their spiritual aspirations, aiming to achieve both mental joy and spiritual solace (Dong, 2008). *Yuan Ye* demonstrates Ji Cheng’s deep familiarity with plant landscaping techniques. His garden design concepts reflect the beauty of poetic imagery and use various plant motifs to create a poetic and emotional living space. Among these plant motifs, the chrysanthemum is especially significant in expressing the shared sentiment between poetry and garden design.

The chrysanthemum, as a symbol of the recluse, has been celebrated by Chinese literati throughout history. The chrysanthemum’s association with reclusion originates with Tao Yuanming (365-427) (Zhang, 2010). Tao Yuanming, initially full of ambition to achieve great deeds, chose to serve in officialdom several times to fulfill his lofty aspirations of reforming the times. However, upon witnessing the corruption, deceit, and moral decay of society, he chose a life of purity and integrity, retreating to the countryside to cultivate himself. The lines “Among the haunts of men I build my hut. There’s noise of wheels and hoofs, but I hear not. How can it leave upon my mind no trace? Secluded heart creates secluded place.I pick fence-side chrysanthemums at will. And leisurely I see the southern hill (Xu, 1994: 39),” describes his spiritual experience after distancing himself from the secular world (Fig. 4 left). The term “Secluded heart” denotes detaching from fame and

fortune and not being bound by power, thus transcending worldly concerns and remaining pure. Tao Yuanming encapsulated this philosophy in the (fence-side) chrysanthemum imagery, depicting his leisure in the garden, casually picking chrysanthemums, and lifting his gaze to meet the Southern Mountain, achieving a harmonious union of the spiritual world and natural scenery. He derived the essence of life from nature and countryside, expressing a pure and serene state of mind.

In *Yuan Ye*, Ji Cheng explicitly uses the planting of chrysanthemums to echo Tao Yuanming's spirit. "Weave a wattle fence and grow chrysanthemums, like Warden Tao in days of yore [Layout] (Ji, 1988: 55)," reflects the high virtues of contentment with poverty and steadfastness, similar to Tao Yuanming's life (Fig. 4 right). Moreover, Chinese literati often depict autumn's desolation to intertwine their own disappointments with the autumn season, initiating the "sad autumn" theme in Chinese literature. In *Chrysanthemum*: "Around the cottage like Tao's autumn flowers grow; Along the hedge I stroll until the sun hangs low. Not that I favour partially the chrysanthemum, But it's the last flower; alter it none will come (Xu, 1994: 129)," Yuan Zhen (779-831) focused on the chrysanthemum as the theme, expressing his admiration for the flower while also subtly conveying the loneliness and melancholy of autumn. Many literati, including Huang Tingjian (1045-1105) and Huang Chao (835-884), have employed autumn chrysanthemums as a theme to convey their feelings of mourning and autumnal melancholy. Ji Cheng also expressed "You notice that beside the withered hedge the chrysanthemum flowers are over; it is winter now, time to explore the warmer hillsides to see if the first plum blossoms are out [Making Use of Natural Scenery] (Ji, 1988: 121)." Chinese literati draw spiritual support from chrysanthemum and plum blossom imagery, preferring to endure material hardships while maintaining the purity and elegance of a scholar (Ye, 2019).

Discussion: Aesthetic characteristics of botanical design in Chinese gardens

The creativity of Chinese garden art lies in the perfect unity of subjective and objective elements, encapsulated in the philosophical concept of "the unity of heaven and humanity." This principle suggests that while gardens appear entirely natural, they also embody human will, resulting in a dual enrichment of both material and spiritual dimensions (Meng, 2023). The plants in *Yuan Ye* are crucial components of its aesthetic system, demonstrating how the objective forms of plants express subjective emotions and ideals, thereby revealing the philosophical aspirations of Chinese garden aesthetics. Gardens serve not only as real spaces for literati to fulfill their cultural and material needs but also as artistic representations that reflect social ideologies and the spiritual and aesthetic demands of literati.

Yuan Ye expresses admiration for Sima Guang (1019–1086, a renowned Song dynasty historian and statesman, also known by his honorific title Lord Wen) and his spirit of "solitary enjoyment," stating, "An area of five mu is no limitation; in fact, you can rival Lord Wen's Garden of Solitary Enjoyment. Throughout the four seasons, never let the flowers fade, and you will be able to wander through them together with your page-boy, Little Jade [Sites Beside a Mansion House] (Ji, 1988: 51)." Sima Guang was deeply engaged in philosophical and moral reflection, advocating for personal simplicity and integrity. His concept of "solitary enjoyment," exemplified by his private garden, represented an ideal of finding contentment through modesty, self-cultivation, and harmony with nature. The "Garden of Solitary Enjoyment" embodied these principles, offering a space where he could seek solace and joy in solitude amidst the natural beauty of plants and landscape. Ji Cheng aspired to emulate Sima Guang"s garden, striving to achieve a harmonious unity of natural beauty, artistic beauty, and emotional beauty in his garden designs through the arrangement of plant landscapes.

The natural beauty of garden plant landscapes reflects a perfect combination of ecological and human environments within the garden space. The plants in the garden are vital elements that constitute its landscape, and the beauty of the garden landscape is fundamentally determined by the natural beauty of these plants. In Chinese garden aesthetics, the natural beauty emphasizes robust growth and vibrant vitality of the plants (Fig. 5 left). The health of garden plants is a prerequisite for their beauty. Furthermore, the design of garden plant landscapes must adhere to the scientific and ecological principles of natural plant growth. In *Yuan Ye*, Ji Cheng emphasizes that "there are no fixed rules for designing gardens but there are certain principles in making use of the natural scenery, and the essential thing is to keep in mind all the four seasons" (Ji, 1988: 119-120).

The artistic beauty of garden plant landscapes is created on the foundation of their "natural beauty" by considering the dimensions of time and space, including the forms, arrangements, and compositions of plants, to produce artistic constructs. Ji Cheng's acknowledgment of the influence of medieval painting in *Yuan Ye* reflects a high degree of appreciation: "The designer should follow the natural cracks in the stone, imitating the brushwork of the old masters. The rocks should be planted with pines from Huangshan, ancient plum trees and fine bamboo. Looking at this scene through a round window is just like seeing scenery reflected in a mirror [Raising Mountains] (Ji, 1988: 109)." The landscape paintings and garden poetry created by ancient Chinese literati provide guiding significance for garden design by infusing "artificial" meanings into the plants found in natural landscapes, imbuing every blade of grass and tree with poetic sentiment (Fig. 6). This transformation allows garden plant landscapes to reflect nature, imitate nature, and express nature (Wang, 2005). The natural attributes of plants, such as their posture and color, are the primary manifestations of the aesthetics of plant landscapes and constitute

essential elements in the creation of artistic beauty. As expressed in *Yuan Ye*: “Amid lovely red and purple blossoms, you will be happy to meet the Angel of the Flowers” [Making Use of Natural Scenery]. Ji Cheng advocates for plant diversity (Fig. 5 middle). By studying the aesthetic characteristics of plant colors and the rules of plant grouping arrangements, one can use the forms, colors, and volumes of plant materials to express the formal beauty of both groupings and individual plants, resulting in landscapes that exhibit a phenomenon of “changing views with every step” (Chen et al., 2024). Additionally, by utilizing the cyclical growth patterns of plants throughout the seasons, one can create a landscape effect that varies with time, producing a sense of botanical beauty that embodies different temporal and spatial characteristics.

The emotional beauty of plant landscapes is achieved through the interaction between people and scenery, eliciting emotional responses inspired by the visual imagery of plants. This fosters a synesthetic resonance among people, landscapes, and emotions. The emotional formation of garden plant landscapes is realized through visual elements such as color and form, as well as through other sensory experiences, including auditory and olfactory perceptions, thus attaining the ideal realm of Chinese garden aesthetics—“the sounds of birds and the fragrance of flowers” (Sun, 2011: 10). Ji Cheng argues that landscape design should not adhere to rigid formulas, stating that “borrowing scenery has no fixed basis; any landscape that evokes feelings can be selected by individuals.” He emphasizes the subjective and spiritual characteristics that emerge from plant landscapes, asserting that a well-designed garden plant landscape should resonate with individuals, creating a harmonious interplay of scenery and sentiment (Fig. 5 right).

Conclusion

In ancient China, literati utilized the imagery of plants in literary and artistic works as a vital medium for expressing emotions, serving as their spiritual refuge concerning ideals of nature, society, and life (Zhang, 2000). These plant images either reflect the ideal pursuits of the literati or serve as a means of emotional release. Such cultural symbols became integral components of the spiritual world of ancient literati through various artistic forms. Ji Cheng’s *Yuan Ye* further elevates the emotional symbolism of these plants through the design of garden plant landscapes, forming a unique aesthetic of Chinese gardening.

Through the study of the aesthetics of plants and the sentiments of ancient literati in *Yuan Ye*, this paper argues that plant landscapes are not merely visual elements of garden design but also a concrete embodiment of the thoughts and emotions of the literati. In garden design, the selection and arrangement of plants reflect not only the designer’s aesthetic aspirations but also deeply embody the ancient Chinese literati’s understanding and pursuit of nature, society, and the self. Firstly, plants such as pine, bamboo, and plum

blossom symbolize noble virtues, reflecting the literati's pursuit of moral ideals. The resilience of pine, the flexibility of bamboo, and the fragrance of plum blossoms represent the literati’s aspirations for steadfastness, humility, and noble character. The layout of these plant elements in gardens enhances visual beauty and deepens people’s understanding and appreciation of the literati's spirit through their symbolic meanings. Secondly, the presence of chrysanthemums in gardens serves not only as a component of natural scenery but also as an expression of literati emotions. Chrysanthemums symbolize solitude and unrecognized talent, reflecting the frustrations and struggles that ancient literati experienced in their pursuit of ideals. In *Yuan Ye*, the planting and arrangement of chrysanthemums convey the literati’s reflections on self-worth and their yearning for social recognition. This emotional shaping makes gardens not just physical spaces but also spiritual havens. Through an in-depth study of plant aesthetics, this paper reveals how ancient literati expressed themselves and achieved harmonious coexistence with nature through plants. The posture, colors, and growth characteristics of plants create unique landscape effects in gardens, further enriching their cultural connotations. This is not only an imitation of nature but also a pursuit of an ideal life and the construction of a spiritual home.

Future research can further explore the evolution of plant landscapes within different historical contexts and their influence on contemporary garden design. Integrating traditional plant aesthetics into modern garden design not only helps to inherit and promote the unique charm of Chinese garden culture but also offers contemporary individuals wisdom for harmonious coexistence with nature (Cahill et al., 2012). In this way, gardens become not only spaces for aesthetic appreciation but also sanctuaries for the human spirit and emotional solace.

Declarations

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author information

Contributions

These authors contributed equally to this work.

Funding Declaration

This research received no external funding.

Ethics declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent

The informed consent was irrelevant as the research did not include any human participants.

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Figures



Figure 1

(left) Three Friends of Winter (Zou, n.d.); **(right) Three Friends of Winter** (Jin, n.d.).

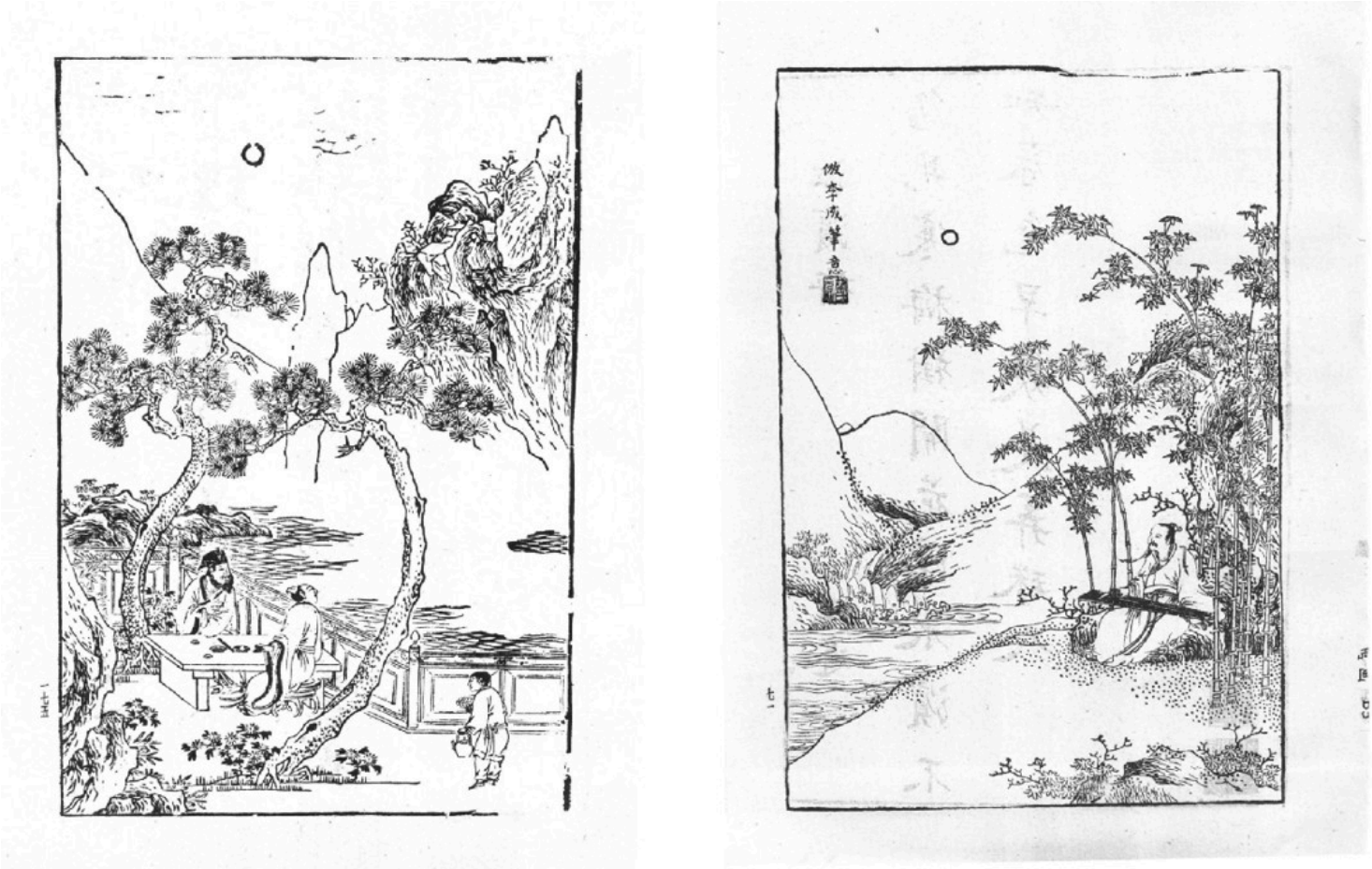


Figure 2

(left) Reciting rhymes amidst the pines (Huang, 1982: 175); **(right) The gentleman of leisure plucks his lute in a grove of bamboo** (Huang, 1982: 71).



Figure 3

(left) Appreciating Antiquities in Bamboo Garden (Qiu, n.d.-a); **(right) Plum among the bamboo** (Huang, 1982: 221).



Figure 4

(left) Painting of Tao Yuanming (Chen, n.d.); **(right) Weave a wattle fence and grow chrysanthemums** (Huang 1982, 213).

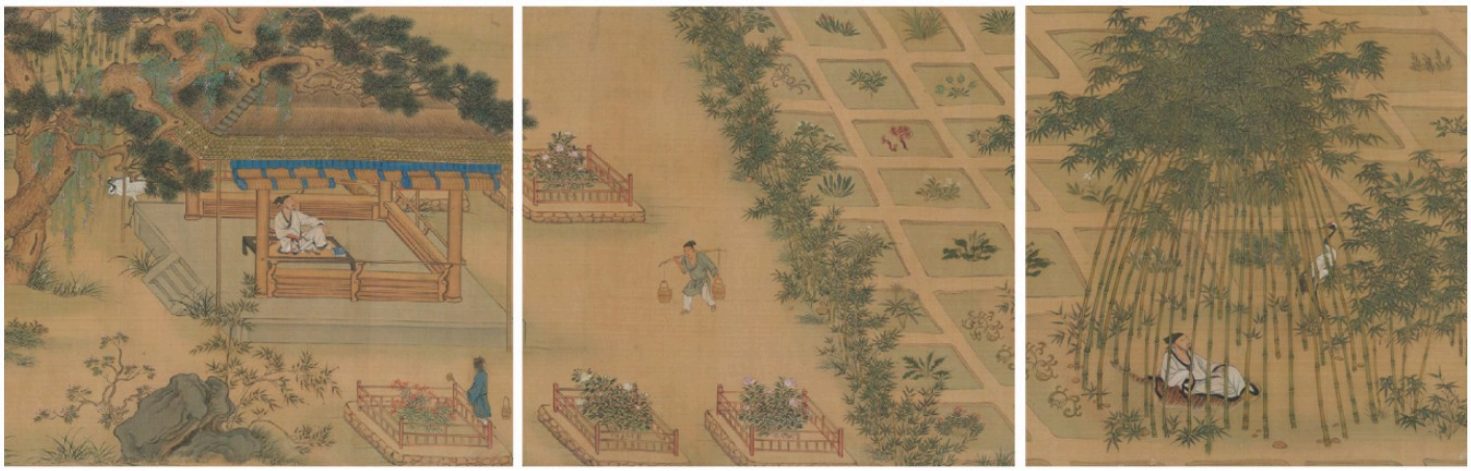


Figure 5

Garden of Solitary Enjoyment Scroll (detail) (Qiu, n.d.-b).

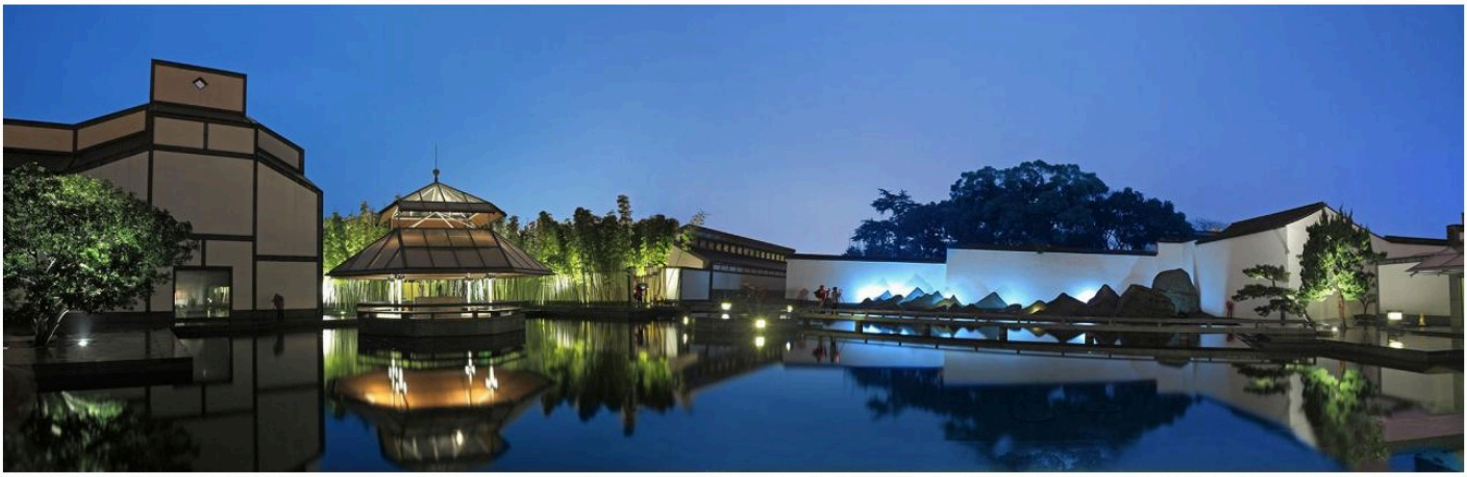


Figure 6

Inner Courtyard of Suzhou Museum, illustrating its reinterpretation and recreation of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Source: Suzhou Museum. https://www.szmuseum.com/Other/BuildingMito