

A Brief Analysis of the Influence of Mountain and Water Elements in Chinese Classical Gardens on the 18th Century British Natural Landscape Gardens

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Abstract: In the 18th century, British gardens began to transform from a classical to a natural landscape style. During this period, they were influenced by the economy, local nature, as well as foreign cultures. The 18th century was the golden period of cultural exchange between China and the West which gave Britain the opportunity to absorb the cultures of Chinese classical gardens. British gardeners had used various elements of Chinese classical gardens as their point of reference which promoted the development of British natural landscape gardens.

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1 Introduction

The dawn of gardening in Britain was around 42 BC, which was during the reign of the Roman empire. The two forms of the Rome gardens, which were the colonnade garden (enclosed garden) and the garden villa (open garden) were models for the early British garden. In the Middle Ages, in order to facilitate missionaries to spread Christianity, monasteries were built in England. At that time, the society was in turmoil. However, the beautiful and comfortable environment inside those monasteries provided spiritual support and comfort for the people. In the 13th century after the war had subsided, the castle which was originally used for military defense gave up its closed and depressed manner and became an opened space for enjoyment. Subsequently, British gardens began to learn from other countries in Europe. Although the development of cultural landscape gardens in various countries had guided the development of Britain's own garden, the British landscape still lacked self-innovation. It always failed to form its

own unique local style. The development of British natural landscapes changed the status of classical regular gardens which lasted for thousands of years and was a milestone in the development of gardens in Europe as well as the whole world.

2 Influencing Factors in the Transformation of British Natural Landscapes in the 18th Century

Firstly, the transformation of the native natural environment in Britain promoted the development of British natural landscapes. After the "Enclosure movement" in the United Kingdom, permanent pastures in the UK increased. In the 18th century, the UK took the lead in launching the Industrial Revolution to reform the cotton textile industry and stimulate the development of animal husbandry. Many pastures were then opened. The Industrial Revolution had used significant amount of coal resources, resulting in the emission of soot and pollutants which led to the deterioration of the ecological environment. People began to seek improvements in terms of their living conditions

and the protection of nature. In regard to that, the British Marine shipbuilding industry promoted large-scale afforestation campaigns. It was the lush meadows, dense forests and complete hilly lands that provided rich soils for the abundance of natural landscape. This unique landscape style also promoted the transformation of British portraitures into natural landscape paintings.

Secondly, the spread of “Enlightenment” philosophies encouraged the British people to pursue simple and natural styles. They were tired of the orderly and rigorous Le Nôtre style garden and turned to seek nature in its origin. This is also the primary reason for the transformation of British gardens into natural landscape styles. In the 14th century, the Renaissance in Italy advocated liberation of individuals while the enlightenment which advocated rationality started to lead people to freedom. In 18th century, landscape architects of Britain began showing interests in naturalism and believed that the artificial designs of the garden violated the ideal of indigenous nature.

Last but not least, British colonial expansion and maritime trade fueled the pursuit of Chinese goods. The bright and exquisite ceramics, as well as the painting scrolls were widely accepted by the Europeans. This provided opportunities for the Chinese and British scholars to communicate with each other; hence, paving the way for the spread of Chinese art in the UK. For example, Sir William Chambers, a British architect, frequently went to China on long voyages with his fleet and devoted himself in learning Chinese architectures, landscape architectures, and decorative arts in his spare time. He also introduced the Oriental Gardening Theory in which he argues that landscape architects should strive to diversify the natural elements in a landscape, and it should provoke emotions more than its natural primitive state.^[1] He lashed out on the popular European classical landscape inclination at that time and accelerated the transformation of the European style of gardening. The patterns of all imported porcelain and lacquer ware were mainly Chinese decorative patterns. Although these images of Chinese nature and gardens were only

fragmentations rather than continuity, they were concrete prototypes for the transformation of British gardens.

3 Development and Use of Aesthetic Concepts of Landscape Elements in Chinese and English Gardens

“Mountains” and “water” are terms used by Chinese people to describe the natural scenery. They are depictions of the natural landscape of China in Chinese landscape gardens. The art form of representing geographical landscapes is known as Chinese landscape paintings, which is introduced by the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties. Since ancient times, these landscape paintings and gardens emphasized on mountains and water. The vertical peaks, horizontal fan-shaped plains, and water bodies are key inspirations in Chinese art.

China is a conventional farming nation. Agricultural civilizations which relied on natural environment are influenced by the early ancestors’ worship of mountains and rivers. The primitive view of nature implied a sense of distance towards mountains and water. Chinese people used the concept of “transformation” to integrate beautiful mountains and clear water in their own gardens for casual viewing.

Chinese gardens emphasized on boundaries whereby walls are used to separate the garden. They are elements which cannot be disregarded in Chinese gardens. The area enclosed by the walls is to create an infinite sense of virtual and real space. It is the epitome of lofty mountains with many leaky and flowered windows. In addition to that, weathered limestone blocks are used to show the rockery. Chinese gardeners used distance and perspective scenes to create the effect of movement and different sceneries; hence, attaining a full view of the natural beauty. The waterscape in Chinese gardens is divided into static and dynamic ones. The static waterscape would stretch the source away or hide it, giving the illusion of the beauty of continuous water. Using the Humble Administrator Garden as an example, the central water source is hidden behind the small surging wave, and

the western water source is hidden in the south of the Pagoda Ying Pavilion. Further exploration is required as these two places are not the only way to appreciate the garden.^[2] On the other hand, dynamic waterscape is composed of artificial water and natural water diversion. The water flows down a waterfall by using stacked rockery as a height advantage.

Western views are different from the Chinese' whereby the harmonious coexistence between man and nature is heavily influenced by "subject-oriented dualism." The emphasis is on individuals' independence and the rationalization of nature with scientific design thinking. The Europeans have the perception whereby "Man can conquer nature." During Louis XIV of France, the Le Nôtre style gardens became popular throughout Europe. During this time, gardens became a form of artistic expression for monarchs to pursue extravagance and power supremacy. The garden's layout was balanced, symmetrical and orderly while the relationship between buildings and the surrounding environment was isolated. The plants in the garden were artificially shaped, pruned and planted in a row with symmetrical style, which reflected the "rational beauty" everywhere. The embracement of the concept of Chinese garden imitation in the UK was incisively and vividly reflected. Eventually, it was popular to construct landscape gardens based on the painters' landscape paintings.^[3]

William Temple was the first person to integrate Chinese garden cultures among the natural aesthetic scholars. He introduced the word "Sharawadgi," which referred to the pattern of Chinese garden lights and aesthetic feelings while emphasizing on natural harmony. However, Temple did not take heed and explore the real philosophical and artistic spirit.

Later, William Kent applied natural aesthetic concepts to the British garden design in which he unreservedly imitated nature. He revolted the lifeless linear design and the garden layout, which was symmetrical both, left and right. He started to halt the classical style by dismissing the garden road, street tree road and the same fountains which were sharp and angular. Although Kent broke the

boundaries in the history of British landscape development, he was still influenced by the classical style. In 18th century, British landscape architectures were no longer constrained by rules of geometry. They were against the specific physical boundaries and began to display an idyllic natural scenery. Owing to the ha-ha ditch (designed by Charles Bridgman) which was a water conduit that also functioned as a fence, it removed all traces rule type, eliminated barriers on the line of sight, and expanded visual fields. Charles Bridgman took the large area of a gentle slope and the complete grassland as leading features of his landscape architecture. He created a consistent landscape with the surrounding natural landscape which deemed a sense of extensionality at that time.

In the early British classical gardens, water was usually in the form of fountains. Thereafter, British landscape architectures gradually developed and regarded water bodies as important landscape elements. British garden areas were huge, however, the terrains lacked height advantage to create dynamic waterscape and hills were only displayed through forms of rivers and lakes. Hence, water can only follow in the path of natural forms. Waterfronts were perfectly integrated with the boundary of hills or lawns to avoid artificial finicky and green plants were also freely scattered. The British landscape architecture was crude, lacked artistry, and expansion.

4 Similarities and Differences between Chinese and British Garden Cultural Exchanges

In the mid-18th century, elements of Chinese garden architectures appeared in British gardens. British architects used the decorations of Chinese garden architectures as simple imitations. During that time, their favorite landscape element was the "China pavilion." This was markedly demonstrated when Richard Bentley designed the triangle of China pavilion for Robert Walpole in Strawberry Fort. The doorway was partly Gothic while the interior decorations were of the Chinese style.^[4] This was much simpler than imitating the overall philosophical spirit of Chinese gardens. Another example was when Chambers designed a "China-

English” garden called Qiu Garden for Kent. There was a Chinese style attic which was referred as “the home of Confucius,” and not far away, was a 10-layer China Tower which was based on the glazed tower of the Gratitude Temple in Nanjing. According to ancient Chinese religion and philosophies, the number of layers should be based on the Yin and Yang whereby odd numbers would represent the Yang while even numbers would represent the Yin. In regard to that, the highest Yang number would be nine and the number of layers in a tower would usually take an odd number as it has auspicious meaning. Traditionally, Chinese people pursue “the unity of man and nature.” They believed that if people lived in a place where the odd numbers of Yang spirits were abundant, they will live longer and healthier while the even numbers of Yin spirits may lead to disasters. Although Chambers’ gardens have displayed a generalization of the Chinese gardens’ spirits, there is a lack of profound interpretation and inevitable connection between the formal reproduction of Chinese gardens and its cultural roots.

The abstract representations of Chinese gardens were not accepted by some Western scholars, who believed that the representations of mountains were not realistic enough by using strange wind-rocks. In addition to that, the Danish geographer Malte-Brun, criticized the lack of imagination portrayed in Chinese gardens as he accused them of being “only accurate imitators of the image of nature.”^[5] Mr. Chen Congzhou had an interesting discussion in *The Continuation of the Garden*. He mentioned that Chinese ancient gardens were usually closed, however, with limited area, infinite space is created and the word ‘ethereal’ is the key to garden construction.^[6] The traditions of Chinese art philosophies do not only represent or simulate natural objects, but they also explore the fundamental principles of the movement in the natural world.^[7] Unfortunately, they were only used to be counterparts in the aesthetic taste of Britain’s budding anti-classicism at that time.^[8]

British gardeners utilized local aesthetic philosophies to integrate and reinterpret the artistic

notions of Chinese gardens. The strong historical shadow, coupled with self-centered consciousness of the West in the British aesthetic sense, resulted with the used of Chinese classical gardens only as prototypes for British gardeners to learn from.

5 Conclusion

In the late 18th century, British gardeners scrambled to create naturalistic gardens, which led to the imitation of art in Chinese gardens. The assimilation of Chinese garden cultures accelerated the transformation of the English native garden style in Britain. Although the integration of Chinese gardens with English gardens formed unique and exotic environments, the inherent philosophies of Chinese garden cultures were misinterpreted. This is because only the surface images of Chinese gardens were accounted for. A saying which goes by “knowing the nature of the situation, but not knowing the reason” depicts these circumstances.

In 1845, British tax were abolished for greenhouse constructions. Along with it, there were many more plant species. The mark of the greenhouse period began whereby gardens started to be commercialized and natural scenery gardens in the UK developed based on “garden styles.” Hence, the interest in the Chinese garden culture gradually diminished.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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