

Analyzing the Gardening Art of Yanshan Garden with *Yuanye* (The Craft of Gardens)

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Abstract: The first systematic theoretical work on gardening in Chinese history, *The Craft of Gardens (Yuanye)* by Ji Cheng, the famous literary gardener of the Ming Dynasty, is an invaluable reference for garden design in succeeding generations. The majority of research on Lingnan classical gardens is focused on Guangdong. The Yanshan Garden in Guilin, which is considered to be the first garden in Lingnan, is a prime example of late Qing Dynasty Lingnan gardens, perfectly combining Guilin landscape design with Lingnan garden architecture. Consequently, it is crucial to examine Yanshan Garden's gardening features and incorporate its superb gardening techniques into modern garden landscape designs.

Keywords: *Yuanye*; Yanshan garden; Classical garden; Gardening art

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1. Introduction

The *Yuanye* (The Craft of Gardens) written by gardener Ji Cheng in the Ming Dynasty is a specialized work that integrates theory and practice on classical gardening in China. This work is highly significant academically^[1]. The piece highlights the distinctiveness of gardening as an art form, contending that it demands the creator to reach an artistic realm that is higher than and derived from nature rather than just replicating the natural world^[2]. It had a profound influence on the classical gardens in China, especially the Jiangnan Gardens, and has great aesthetic significance and reference value for the construction of contemporary landscape gardens. Yanshan is the most well-preserved among the trio of existing classical gardens in Guangxi. Its gardening methods are distinctive, bearing significant research value and exerting a profound influence on Guangxi's modern gardens. However, the available literature on Yanshan Garden remains relatively limited when it comes to comprehensive investigations, particularly in the realm of garden theory. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to interpret the gardening art of Yanshan Garden from the gardening concept of *Yuanye*, to further understand the gardening characteristics of Yanshan Garden.

2. Ji Cheng and *Yuanye*

Ji Cheng was born in 1582, the 10th year of the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty, and later settled in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province. In a chance encounter, he overlaid a rugged mountain for local gardening enthusiasts. This event made him famous and opened a whole new chapter in his life, that is gardening. He visualized the landscapes in his paintings as garden art and became a highly respected master, leaving behind a series of garden works and the famous work *Yuanye*. *Yuanye* was initially named *Yuanmu*, but it was changed to *Yuanye* following the then-famous Cao Yuanfu's proposal. The writing for *Yuanye* took four years and was funded for printing by Anqing Ruan Dacheng in 1634. However, the book soon fell from public attention because the contributor Ruan Dacheng is an unpopular traitor, which makes *Yuan Ye* classified as a banned book. The later generations did not realize its theoretical significance and practical value, which made it unattended for three hundred years. According to the record, the Ming Dynasty version of the entire book *Yuan Ye* was loaded into Japan by ship in 1735 and was stored in the Red Leaf Mountain Library. In the 1920s and 1930s, *Yuan Ye* was brought back to China from Japan, and through the promotion of scholars such as Chen Zhi, the value of the book attracted the attention of people in the field of gardening.

3. Yanshan Garden

Yanshan Garden is located in Dabu township, Yanshan District, Guilin City, 24 kilometers away from the center of Guilin City and 40 kilometers away from Yangshuo County. The garden is a popular place to visit in Yangshuo. Yanshan Garden covers a total area of about 150,000 square meters, which is the first of the three classical gardens in Guangxi in terms of area. Yanshan Garden is surrounded by mountains and water, with many ancient and famous trees and a profound history and culture. It has become the top private garden in the Lingnan area with its unique natural landscape and strong humanistic features and has been crowned with the reputation of the top garden in Lingnan. Yanshan Garden has a history of more than a hundred years. In the early years of *Xianfeng* (1854), a Qing Dynasty scholar known as Tang Yue created the Yanshan Garden, making it a private villa. The garden follows the design style of the Lingnan garden of the period, planting a variety of distinctive Lingnan garden plants^[3]. However, after Tang Yue's death, the family gradually declined, and the descendants sold the garden to Cen Chunxuan, the governor of the two Guangzhou regions, who restored and remodeled Yanshan Garden and added the Xilin Pavilion, which restored Yanshan Garden to its former prosperity. Since recent years, Yanshan Garden has attracted many tourists and scholars, who have appreciated its design style^[4].

4. The gardening ideas of *Yuanye*

4.1. Traditional natural philosophical thought in ancient China

Confucius suggested, "The wise man enjoys the mountains, the benevolent man enjoys the water". The location of Yanshan Garden fully reflects the Confucian view of landscape literature, east of the layered mountains, west of Yanshan, south of Fangzhu Mountain, north of Zhongmu Mountain. The park also has a natural formation of Qingluo Creek and Xiangsi Lake, and the landscape elements are integrated with each other to create a natural landscape painting. According to a site investigation in *Yuanye*, the only gardens found in mountains and forests are high and concave which creates their natural interest while not interfering with human affairs. This quote expresses the importance of natural beauty in the development of mankind. Mountain forests are considered ideal because they allow one to enjoy being in a purely natural setting^[5]. Yanshan Garden adheres to the aesthetic and philosophical ideas of classical Chinese gardens, and the entire garden is based on the actual

landscape, reasonably arranges rocks, flowers, trees, and buildings, emphasizes the natural beauty of natural interest and valuing true nature while striving for a high degree of harmony and unity with nature to achieve the realm of nature-like creations.

4.2. The gardening idea of “Good at depending and borrowing from the land, and skillful at grasping the benefits of the land”

The construction theory in *Yuanye* mentioned the creative concept and basic method of garden architectural design, that is “Good at depending and borrowing from the land, and skillful at grasping the benefits of the land”, which means that garden planning and design should be adapted to local conditions, skillful layout, and fully utilize the natural scenery so that the height, size, shape, and style of buildings in the garden are suitable and appropriate ^[6]. “Depending” is primarily embodied in the following specifications, building depending on the ground, utilizing depending on materials, and depending on the appropriate time. Yanshan Garden retains all of the characteristics of the original site while also creating a unique landscape that compensates for the original site’s shortcomings and reflects Laozhuang’s perspective on nature ^[7]. The overall layout is simple and clear, nothing feels cumbersome or overelaborated from the arrangement of landscape and pavilions to the detailed treatment of stones and trees ^[8]. At the same time, Yanshan Garden’s design emphasizes building depending on the ground, utilizing depending on materials, and depending on the appropriate time. In this way, garden architecture not only demonstrates the natural flavor, but also saves time, manpower, and material resources, achieving the artistic realm of nature-like creations.

5. Landscaping skills of *Yuanye*

5.1. Building depending on the land

Site investigation in *Yuanye* pointed out that a suitable location is the key to building a decent garden. Selecting a suitable location is the first step in garden construction ^[9]. Garden bases do not have to be bound by the direction of high and low terrain, and should be shaped according to the scenery. If there are mountains and forests, they should be used, as well as rivers and lakes, to create a sense of depth and distance, and to realize the design concept of “building depending on the land.”

Tang Yue has made careful planning in the site selection and construction of the garden. Yanshan Garden is located in Guilin’s southern suburb, in a typical karst landscape surrounded by mountains and water. Based on preserving the original natural environment, Tang Yue skillfully created a private garden with lakes, ponds, streams, caves, jagged rocks, gurgling water, and ancient trees, demonstrating the true beauty of landscape gardening ^[10].

5.2. Depending on the appropriate time

Borrowing scenery in *Yuanye* suggested that “There is no pattern in building a garden, but there is a reason for borrowing scenery, and it is important to have the four seasons, and it has nothing to do with the eight mansions”. In addition to “depending on the land”, Ji Cheng also emphasized the “depending on an appropriate time” part ^[11]. This entails taking into account the changes in landscape and color that occur throughout the four seasons and incorporating them into the overall garden design concept. Yanshan Garden skillfully introduces landscapes from outside the garden into the garden through borrowing. The complement of landscapes inside and outside the garden creates diverse landscape levels and beautiful visual effects. For example, from the Xuanzhu Bridge in the garden, you can see the silhouette of Yan Mountain, which resembles a wild goose spreading its wings, creating the beauty of “a wild goose falling on the flat sand”, which is achieved by

borrowing the landscape from afar. In addition, when the azaleas are in full bloom in March and April, the view of “spring red on the wild goose hill” can be seen from the heights of the garden ^[12].

5.3. Utilizing depending on materials

Ji Cheng pointed out that the use of small gravel paving can make the road surface solid and smooth, giving people a sense of the beauty of stepping on pomegranate seeds, but also bringing good luck. He also stated that cobblestones are best laid in infrequently traveled and somewhat remote places, in various sizes, which requires extraordinary skill. Therefore, different materials should be selected according to their characteristics of the appropriate use of the place to achieve their best uses. Yanshan Garden makes good use of natural stone to create the landscape, lakes, and ponds. The original soil of the embankment is maintained, while water washout is skillfully used to create the landscape with natural stone. The Fishing Pavilion is located next to the Hantong building. The natural loose stone foundation is used to construct the pavilion frame and bridge, and the Dangui Terrace and Fishing Terrace are both made of natural stones with a little polishing to show the natural design. The garden paths are paved with small green stones or natural cobblestones, undulating with the terrain, winding paths, and moving scenery. This practice not only reduces labor costs but also saves materials, which is the key to the success of Yanshan Garden.

6. The idea of the mountains and rocks of *Yuanye*

Yuanye pursues the appropriateness of rocks in the garden space. The types of rocks required to achieve specific scenery should be based on different spatial patterns to choose the appropriate types of rocks, and to deal with the relationship between different rocks following the principle of “scenery to the random”. Based on the natural landscape pattern, Yanshan Garden builds rocks and stones with a sense of naturalness, which can be used individually or combined to form a landscape, and creates an atmosphere of deep and winding paths by artificially superimposing scenic rocks around the lake. In addition, the garden combines rocks and mountains with bodies of water, plants, and buildings to create a rich spatial effect, creating natura-like man-made landscapes.

7. Botanical landscaping technique of *Yuanye*

The book of *Yuanye* is not specifically related to flowers and trees, but rather about the planting of scenery throughout the text. From the opening line, “The wall is hidden among the roses, and the house frame is winding at the end of the wood” to the last line, “Half a window is covered with fruits and trees, and the wall ring surrounded by green roses and figs”, it reflects the close relationship between planting design and gardening, and shows Ji Cheng’s unique insights into flower and tree landscaping. Yanshan Garden creates a beautiful and pleasant floral landscape space through the reasonable arrangement of plants. In the horizontal space, the play area is densely planted with plants of precious or high ornamental value to meet the demand of garden viewing. On the vertical space, tall trees such as cypress, camphor, and Chinese tallow tree form the highest layer, the middle layer is dominated by small trees such as osmanthus, sunflower, red clover, longan, and so on, while the lower layer includes shrubs and ground cover plants. The plants in the garden are well organized and hierarchical, with good ornamental properties ^[13].

8. Reinventing the poetic and pictorial context of *Yuanye*

According to the site investigation in *Yuanye*, “Multiple inscriptions, thin with holes”, which expresses the

close relationship between classical Chinese gardens and literature. Whether royal, private, or temple gardens, classical Chinese gardens considered couplets and tablets as essential elements. The rocks, grass, trees, ponds, pavilions, and other landscapes in the garden create the mood of the garden, while the garden plaque, inscription, and couplets on the text convey the emotion. The text in the garden is an indispensable way to express the artistic mood of the garden. In Yanshan Garden, there are plaques, inscriptions, couplets, carved beams, and paintings everywhere. The poems on the couplets not only describe the scenery but also express the emotions born from the scenery. The scenery and emotions are intertwined with the state of the world, which adds countless meanings to Yanshan Garden. For example, at the gate of Yanshan Garden, there are couplets such as “Many good days in spring and autumn, no common feelings in the forest garden” and “People are quiet by the red laurel, birds are free by the blue pool” on the Dan Pavilion ^[14].

The picturesque of Yanshan Garden comes from the owner’s skillful landscaping techniques, such as borrowed landscape and framed landscape. Borrowed scenery skillfully uses the natural scenery outside the garden to form a landscape, which raises the level of scenery inside the garden and deepens the meaning of the garden. The framed scenery shows a unique flavor by incorporating distant natural scenery and humanistic landscape into the frame through elements such as door frames, windows, cave doors, and tree branches. Yanshan Garden presents the artistic beauty of poetry and painting through the literary elements in the garden and skillful landscape design techniques.

9. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the gardening art of Yanshan Garden from the perspective of *Yuanye*, revealing its unique charm as one of the masterpieces of the Lingnan gardens. The gardening techniques of Yanshan Garden not only provide a useful reference for modern garden design but also reflect the close relationship between *Yuanye* and Chinese classical gardens. In the future, further study of the Lingnan gardens and an in-depth understanding of the connection between them with *Yuanye* will help us to better develop the art of gardening.

Author contributions

This is a single-authored work.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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