

A Comparative Study on Chinese and Western Classical Gardens

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Abstract: *As the ideal home for man, garden is not only a craftsmanship, but also an integrated art. It is the embodiment of man's views on nature, aesthetics, and modes of thinking in the process of transforming and utilizing natural environment to create an ideal home, reflecting the cultural features of a specific society. Due to the differences in natural conditions and cultural backgrounds, the gardens in China and the West develop in a diametrically opposite way from the very beginning. By the methods of comparative study, this paper will first discuss the differences between Chinese and Western classical gardens, and then explore the main reasons behind those differences, giving readers a better understanding of their respective characteristics, and different cultures.*

Keywords: Chinese and Western Classical Gardens, Differences, Reasons.

1. Introduction

Garden is a recreation environment and material carrier created by people to satisfy their yearning for beautiful living environment, expressing the closest relationship between human and nature. It not only embodies the spiritual feelings of human beings, but also reflects the cultural features of a specific society. Therefore, under the different cultural backgrounds, gardens in different regions exhibit complete different features, which in turn embody the differences between cultures.

Generally speaking, gardens in the world can be divided into two systems, eastern and western systems. Chinese classical garden is the representative of the former while Italian Renaissance garden, French formal garden, and English landscape garden are the representative of the latter (Pang, 2012). Due to the different natural conditions and cultures, Chinese and Western classical gardens differ from each other in many aspects. An analysis of their differences and reasons behind those differences is helpful to have a better understanding of Chinese and Western classical gardens, as well as the cultural differences between China and the West.

2. Differences between Chinese and Western Classical Gardens

This section tries to discuss the differences between Chinese and Western classical gardens. Since there are numerous differences between two of them, the focus will be given to their representational differences, including the garden styles, gardening techniques, and gardening elements.

2.1 Difference in Garden Styles

When it comes to the garden styles, Chinese classical garden belongs to natural landscape style while Western classical garden basically falls into the formal style (Zhou, 2005). Chinese classical garden adopts unique gardening techniques to reasonably organize the gardening elements, such as architectures, water, stones, plants and so forth, making it an organic whole which is not a simple imitation of nature.

Winding bridges, zigzagging corridors, secluded paths, flowing streams and so many other gardening elements are made in accordance with the dips and rises of terrain, the relief of mountain, as well as the flow of water, integrating perfectly artificial beauty with natural beauty. Those gardening elements form the unique features of a natural landscape garden, displaying the respect for nature.

On the contrary, Western classical garden stresses the symmetrical arrangement of gardening elements, formal layout of architecture, and the unity of overall form, reflecting man's transformation and control over nature. In a Western classical garden, buildings are in the central position, whose axis serves as the central axis of the garden; straight and axis-like roads are lined by leafy trees; plants and flowers are trimmed into geometrical patterns. All of those gardening elements are combined in the geometrical network with clear arrangement, strict order, and distinct principal and subordinate relation, strongly displaying the artificial beauty of the garden.

In a word, Chinese classical garden shows the respect for nature, belonging to the natural landscape garden. However, Western classical garden demonstrates the insistence on physical control over nature, belonging to the formal garden.

2.2 Difference in Gardening Techniques

Difference between Chinese and Western classical gardens is also reflected in the gardening techniques. Through adopting totally different techniques, Chinese and Western classical gardens are presented in different forms. The difference mainly involves the following three aspects: design of line, spatial arrangement, as well as some techniques unique to Chinese classical garden.

The difference between Chinese and Western classical gardens in gardening techniques is first reflected in their design of line. Chinese classical garden advocates the beauty of curves while Western classical garden prefers straight lines. Most gardening elements in a Chinese classical garden are designed into curves. For example, in the Humble

Administrator's Garden, one of the largest gardens in Suzhou, it is common to see the zigzagging roads, winding bridges, curving roof lines, and irregular shapes, thus constituting the curvaceous beauty of Chinese classical garden. In contrast, straight lines are quiet everywhere in a Western classical garden. Straight roads, rectangular lawns, and regular geometric shapes are the main components of Western classical gardens, demonstrating the beauty of straight lines.

From the perspective of spatial arrangement, Chinese classical garden seeks inward development, while Western classical garden is mainly in outward expansion. Apart from royal gardens, most Chinese private gardens are small in size and enclosed by high walls (Pang, 2012). Yet, owners, also designers of those gardens use limit space and scenery to express limitless artistic conception by such techniques as borrowing, framing, suppressing and so forth. Privates gardens, even the royal garden, are masterly partitioned into several sections with different views by rockeries, arch bridges, high walls with moon-like gates, or a cluster of tall bamboo to keep out the view, making the whole garden like a scroll painting whereby the landscape of each section is exposed not in one but in a continual succession of views. Through those techniques, garden space is arranged skillfully so that visitors pass pleasantly from one scenery to another scenery, evoking their different kinds of inner feelings according to the changes of garden scenery. Without high enclosure or thick forest to close the garden in a self-contained space, Western classical garden has no clear distinction between inside and outside the garden (Siren, 1950). But the whole garden space is divided into geometric sections by straight roads, making the scope and boundaries inside the garden clearer. Such open arrangement offers visitors a sweeping view of the garden which is a magnificent spectacle. Meanwhile, some unique techniques are applied to the design of Chinese classical garden, involving borrowing, adding, framing, revealing, contrasting, suppressing, and blocking. Among those techniques, borrowing plays an extremely important role in the art of garden design in China. By introducing scenery from outside the garden, borrowing can expand the space of the garden, increase the depth of field, and add more layers to views, thus creating unlimited views in a limited space and integrating elements within and without the garden ("Ancient", 2018). A most successful use of this technique is the Humble Administrator's Garden, where the profile of pagoda of the distant Beisi Temple is perfectly merged into the garden's scenery, creating an image of a "garden outside the garden" and "scenery outside the scenery".

2.3 Difference in Gardening Elements

Chinese and Western classical gardens also differ from each other in gardening elements. Architectures, water, stones, and plants are the basic elements in both Chinese and Western classical gardens. It is because those elements are designed into different forms that Chinese and Western classical gardens have their own distinct characters.

Firstly, the position of garden architecture is different in Chinese and Western classical gardens. Rather than

dominating the garden, many buildings in Chinese classical gardens rise up according to the terrain, and are scattered over the garden. A fanciful variety of design, curving roof lines, and absence of walls on one or on all sides bring these structures into harmony with the natural surroundings around them. Because of their small scale and area coverage, garden architectures are subordinate to natural landscape in Chinese classical gardens. In a Western classical garden, architectures are not only huge in size and scale, but also in the central position on a higher ground, serving as the axis of the garden. Garden architectures are in a dominant position, while other structures, like fountains, sculptures and squares, as well as the natural surroundings serve as foils.

Secondly, water appears in different forms in Chinese and Western classical gardens. In a Chinese classical garden, water is usually in no particular form and more natural, involving lake, pond, stream, and waterfall. Whether it is static or dynamic, water is shaped by natural but irregular stone-piled banks. The water surface is combined with bridges, corridors, island and plants to form a beautiful picture full of artistic sentiment. In contrast, water in Western classical gardens is mostly geometric and regular fountains, springs, pools and canals.

Thirdly, stones are also carved into different forms in Chinese and Western classical gardens. Mounds making and stones laying are common stone of arts in Chinese classical gardens. For example, the Lion Grove in Suzhou is famous for its stone laying. Through processing the stone materials with different textures and shapes, Chinese garden masters make garden rockeries of various shapes and styles. Combined with water in the garden, rockeries can inspire visitors' association with the magnificent mountains and rivers in nature. Contrary to rockeries in Chinese classical gardens, stones are carved into sculptures in Western classical gardens. If rockeries in Chinese classical gardens can be regarded as a kind of abstract sculpture, sculptures in Western classical gardens are representational and realistic.

Finally, as for the plants in Chinese and Western classical gardens, difference is still obvious. Plants are diverse in Chinese classical gardens, ranging from flowers blooming at different times, to evergreen trees alternating with deciduous ones, greatly increasing the enjoyment of the garden. High and low scattered trees are pruned to restore their natural beauty. Apart from their shapes, colors, and smell, plants in Chinese classical gardens are also given different cultural meanings to express certain feelings. For example, bamboo's hollow inside implies modest, and the upstanding body symbolizes the noble character and fortitude spirit of a gentleman. Plants in Western classical gardens, however, are trimmed into geometrical patterns or lined neatly by the straight roads to show the artificial beauty.

3. Reasons behind Those Differences

After a comparative analysis of the differences between Chinese and Western classical gardens, this section is going to explore the reasons behind those differences from the

following four aspects: objects of imitation, identities of garden master, gardening ideas and geographical conditions.

3.1 Difference in Objects of Imitation

Although both Chinese and Western classical gardens are man-made environment to better our living conditions, their objects of imitation are quite different. Chinese classical gardens originate from You (囿) which is an enclosed region with thriving wild plants and animals for the emperors and aristocrats to amuse themselves in hunting. Furthermore, the construction of pavilions, the design of water, and the laying of stones in the courtyard promote the continuous development and maturing of Chinese classical gardens. Due to the full contact with nature, Chinese garden masters have regarded nature as the object of imitation from the very beginning, and the “imitation of nature” has become the law that Chinese garden masters have always followed.

In contrast, the prototype of Western classical gardens is practical gardens, such as the vegetable and fruit gardens which are divided by irrigation canals into rectangular flat ground (Zhou, 2005). In its continuous development, elements such as the geometric subdivision, the orderly plant cultivation, as well as the straight roads and water canals gradually become the main format and content of Western classical gardens (Shen, 2014). In other word, the object of imitation for Western classical gardens is the man-made nature.

Through tracing back the origins of both Chinese and Western classical gardens, it is clear to see that Chinese classical gardens imitate rivers, lakes, woods, birds and so many others in the world of nature, while Western classical gardens take the man-made nature as the prototype.

3.2 Difference in Identities of Garden Master

Since all the gardens are made by man, garden masters play a critical role in determining how to design the gardens, thus influencing the style of the gardens. Garden masters in ancient China were usually intellectuals who were well versed in painting, calligraphy, engraving and poetry. During their construction of their gardens, techniques in painting were used to make gardens poetic and full of cultural connotations. On the contrary, the design of most Western classical gardens was usually accomplished by architects who were not equipped with a specialized knowledge of gardening. They tended to apply the theories of architectural composition to the design of the gardens, making the gardens geometrical. As a result, Western classical gardens were subordinated to the architectures in most cases.

3.3 Difference in Gardening Ideas

Difference between Chinese and Western classical gardens is mostly subjected to different gardening ideas with the infiltration of philosophical foundation and aesthetic ideology. Chinese classical gardens are strongly influenced by Taoism which upholds retiring from the secular world, the conformity

of nature, as well as non-action. Such thought led Chinese traditional intellectuals to take keen pleasure in the calm landscape of the remote countryside, even returned to nature to find comfort and resonance. Because of the physical difficulty of frequent visits to the sources of such delight, Chinese traditional intellectuals exerted their talent to recreate a microcosm of the natural world near at hand. At the same time, Chinese classical gardens stress “learning outward from nature and getting inward from the heart” (Shen, 2014). The principle implies that garden should take the world of nature as the model, but not make a mechanical copy of it. In the construction of the garden, garden master’s feelings and emotions evoked by the natural world were also integrated into the design of their gardens. Such philosophy of gardening manifests the harmony and coordination between man and nature in Chinese classical gardens.

The philosophical foundation and aesthetic ideology for the geometrical style of the West can date back to ancient Greece. According to Pythagorean School, numbers are the basic elements of the world. They therefore observed arts from the perspective of the numbers, advocating that the beauty of art should come from the harmony and proportion of numbers. Such kind of aesthetic ideology was reinforced with the development of natural science in 16-17th century. At that time, Descartes’s rationalism was prevailing. According to Descartes, a set of dependable, systematic artistic regulations and criteria should be established. Those norms were rational and not based on experience, feelings or customs. Under the influence of rationalism, arts, like mathematics, should be clear and logical. When it comes to gardening, such ideology demonstrates itself that gardens should be proportional, axially symmetric and subordinate to the principal buildings. The aesthetic ideology of rationalism has profoundly influenced the evolution of geometrical style in garden making.

3.4 Difference in Geographical Conditions

Due to the difference in geographical conditions, the Chinese and the Westerners have formed different national characters which will directly influence their views on nature and their modes of thinking, and the influence the development of Chinese and Western classical gardens. Chinese civilization originates and thrives along big rivers. With superior geographical conditions on farming, this region is suitable for human habitation. Chinese nation thus forms a stable and orderly way of life, as well as a deep feeling attached to the land. Combined with a relatively stable social environment and long rule of the Han nationality in ancient China, traditional culture has always been developed within a closed region. Under such circumstances, characters like peace, simplicity, naturalness, integration of nature and human as well as introversion are deeply ingrained in Chinese people. As a result, nature is regarded as an object of aesthetic appreciation rather than an object of struggle in Chinese eyes, and Chinese introverted personality also leads to their inward exploration and improvement. For this reason, Chinese classical gardens are usually enclosed by high walls, in which

each scenery is well designed to achieve perfect integration of natural and artificial beauty.

Unlike the hospitable environment in China, geographical conditions in the West are relatively poor. Infertile land and scant natural resources force Westerners into exploring outward. Thus, Westerners of adventure and pioneering spirit treat nature as the object of struggle, and seek outward exploration. Therefore, Western classical gardens tend to be large in size and have no clear distinction between inside and outside the gardens, within which man's control over nature is reflected everywhere.

4. Conclusion

Although both Chinese and Western classical gardens are made to better our living conditions, they developed in an opposite way. Generally speaking, Chinese classical gardens present a natural beauty featuring the harmony between man and nature, while Western classical gardens display the artificial beauty for a man to conquer the nature. The primary reason why Chinese and Western classical gardens differ from each other in garden styles, gardening techniques, and gardening elements lies in their different natural conditions which shape the characters of a nation, and then influence their views on nature and modes of thinking. These factors have finally influenced the different forms of expression of Chinese and Western classical gardens. The comparative study on two of them intends to give us a holistic view on their differences and reasons behind those differences, which is useful in understanding and appreciating cultural differences. Although Chinese and western classical gardens have different forms of expression, they are neither superior nor inferior. Together they constitute a rich and colorful world garden, and also reflect the diversity of world cultures.

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