Spatial Creation of "Yi" and "Xiang": The Aesthetic Appreciation of Imagery in Chinese Classical Garden Art

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Abstract. "Yi" (Emotional Connotation) and "xiang" (Image) were two very important categories in traditional Chinese aesthetics, and the aesthetic mechanism formed by the combination of the them providing infinite possibilities for the mutual connection and mapping between the objective world and subjective emotions. Based on the "Aesthetic Mechanism of Imagery", elements such as mountains, water, plants, animals, humanities, and furnishings in Chinese classical gardens provide viewers could rich cultural connotations and imagery perception, thus constructing the "Aesthetic System of Imagery" for Chinese classical garden art under the joint action of "yi" and "xiang". Furthermore, through further discussion and comparison, it is found that the "Aesthetic System of Imagery" for Chinese classical garden art is an important spiritual core and ethnic characteristic that distinguishes Chinese classical gardens from any other garden and landscape form.

Keywords: Imagery beauty; Aesthetic mechanism of image with emotional connotation; Chinese classical garden art; Elements of gardening; Garden living environment.

1 Introduction

In Chinese classical aesthetics, *"yi xiang"* (Concept-Image) is an important category, which refers to the aesthetic construct where subjective emotion and objective image achieve organic unity through artistic creation, forming a realm beyond verbal expression. While Chinese classical gardens represent a spatial art form that prioritizes the viewer's comprehensive sensory experience, with the ultimate goal of achieving beauty through artistic conception. From a philosophical standpoint, the creation of garden spaces and environments involves a close relationship between the objectively existing scenery and the emotional responses of the viewer, akin to the interplay between *"yi"* (Emotional Connotation) and *"xiang"* (Image) in traditional Chinese aesthetics [1]. This connection arises because the consciousness of "Image" in ancient China facilitated emotional engagement and spiritual exchange during aesthetic experiences within the garden space. As noted by the modern Chinese philosopher Zong Baihua, in Chinese classical garden art, "the scenery is imbued with emotion, and

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emotions are concretely expressed through the scenery” [2]. Reconsidering this proposition through the lens of the relationship between “Emotional Connotation” and “Image”, the environmental design and atmosphere cultivation of Chinese classical gardens could be understood as aesthetic activities centered on rich image elements within the garden space. This reflected one of the key ways in which the concept of image beauty evolved into a mature aesthetic and artistic theory during the late feudal period of China, as manifested in the realm of garden art.

2 Literature Review

In ancient Chinese aesthetic thought, the object of aesthetic appreciation is not merely a material entity or physical form but rather the “Image” that pertains to perception. The consciousness of “Image” was already widely present in primitive culture, which was centered on witchcraft and integrated primitive myths and totem worship. This reflected the early cultural psychology of Chinese primitive aesthetic consciousness. However, during the Pre-Qin period, the factor of “Image” had not yet developed into an independent aesthetic thinking activity with subjective consciousness [3]. The significant literary advancements of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties transformed “Image” and “Emotional Connotation” into relatively complete philosophical and aesthetic issues [4]. In the Tang Dynasty, with its emphasis on originating from humanity, discussions on "image and meaning" and related concepts were further developed, focusing more on human aesthetic positioning. This elevated “Concept-Image” into a concept firmly rooted within the framework of aesthetics [5]. Although Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng-Zhu School during the Song Dynasty, infused rational moral and ethical considerations into the expression of the aesthetic subject's emotions and the occurrence of aesthetic activities [6], it also bridged the gap between life and aesthetics, accumulating rich artistic practical experience for the development of image aesthetics. The Yangming's Philosophy of the Mind of the Ming Dynasty placed even greater emphasis on the subjective and ontological significance of the mind, reaffirming the role of the aesthetic subject's thoughts and desires in contemplating objective images. As a result, the theory of image aesthetics in Chinese classical aesthetics reached its final peak and entered a summarizing phase [7]. During this period, “Image” evolved into a mature aesthetic and art proposition, beginning to exhibit transformations aligned with modern aesthetic significance [8].

In conclusion, the aesthetic of Concept-Image in Chinese aesthetics represents an intrinsic communication mechanism between the subject and object. This mechanism arises from the mutual interaction and integration of the “Emotional Connotation” of human and the “Image” of objects during the processes of philosophical speculation and artistic practice. Analogous to the “coupling phenomenon” in physics, this mechanism ultimately establishes a comprehensive artistic aesthetic process that encompasses objective images, the virtual constructs of the author's aesthetic psychology, the aesthetic symbol system embedded in the artwork, and the virtual constructs of the recipient's aesthetic psychology, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

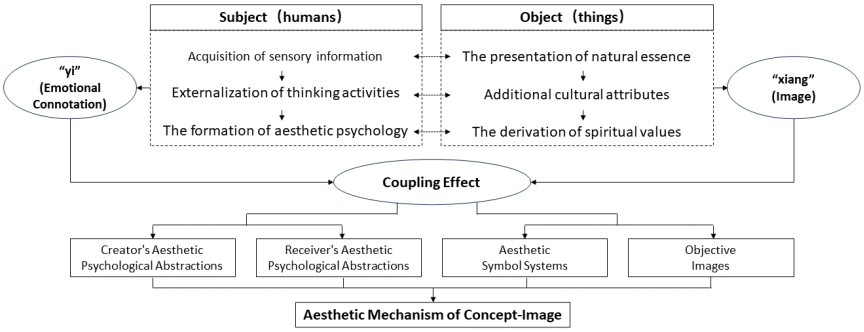

Fig. 1. The formation of the Aesthetic Mechanism of Concept-Image

Unlike Western Philosophical Aesthetics, ancient Chinese discussions on aesthetics predominantly centered on the realm of art. Consequently, Chinese aesthetics exhibits more pronounced characteristics of Art Aesthetics, reflecting its origins in the artistic practices of human society [9]. Although the development of "Image" consciousness is rich in philosophical speculation, its coupling with "Emotional Connotation" remains embedded within various forms of artistic expression and deeply rooted in the soil of artistic practice. The aesthetic of Concept-Image is, in fact, a spiritual product that emerged from diverse artistic practices. The process of generating garden beauty essentially constitutes an imagery construction activity focused on garden-making elements and life scenes.

3 Research Findings

3.1 Concept-Image of Mountain-and-Water: A Spiritual Anchor Rooted in the Concept of "Bi De"

Ancient humans' worship of nature stemmed from their primitive perception of various elements and phenomena in the natural world, which was reflected in their aspirations and expectations for the real world. In ancient Egypt, where drought and scarce rainfall were prevalent, agriculture developed around the Nile River. Fertile farmland represented the idealized beautiful scenery in the ancient Egyptians' conception of an ideal world; thus, tomb murals often depicted flat orchards and vegetable gardens that integrated food production with recreational activities. Ancient Persia, despite its mountainous terrain, had few rivers. The Persians' ideal paradise was farmland irrigated by clear water, exemplified by the Persian Four-part Garden, which refined and reproduced the ancient irrigation agricultural landscape. Ancient China, with its suitable climate and diverse topography, viewed mountains and water as the foundation of its initial understanding of nature, fostering a deep reverence and longing for the natural world [10].

However, the aforementioned primitive perception had yet to ascend to the level of ideological and spiritual elevation. The psychological response of ancient Chinese individuals toward mountains and rivers marked a significant breakthrough from

primitive natural worship to the externalization of subjective emotions, symbolized by Confucius' *"bi de"* (Comparative Virtue) philosophy—namely, "The wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in mountains". By the Ming and Qing dynasties, emotional attachment to mountains and rivers became increasingly pronounced. Artists further categorized and abstracted the Concept-Image of mountains and rivers from earlier works, refining relatively fixed symbolic patterns and even directly emulating or replicating the compositions and archetypal forms of classical masterpieces. This process ultimately facilitated the transition from literary imagination and pictorial representation to the spatial construction of living environments.

In his work *Chang Wu Zhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things)*, Wen Zhenheng (1585-1645), a literary figure and aesthetician of the late Ming Dynasty, wrote: "Stones evoke a sense of antiquity, while water evokes a sense of distance; in gardens, water and stones are indispensable". Here, he emphasized stones rather than mountains because in classical Chinese garden design, artificial mountains constructed from various types of stones are often used to simulate natural ones. Through the perception of these artificial mountains, people can appreciate the beauty of natural landscapes. Wen Zhenheng further stated that "A single peak can symbolize the grandeur of Mount Taihua (a famous mount in ancient China), and a small pool can represent the vastness of rivers and lakes". Although mountains and waters in gardens merely serve as miniature representations of natural landscapes, they evoke profound and enduring emotions in the hearts of the ancients.

Overall, the ancient Chinese did not limit their observation and appreciation of scenery to the scenery itself. Instead, they focused on the psychological activities evoked by the scenery as a core element, enabling a deeper interaction between themselves and nature. In other words, natural objects serve merely as the foundational components of the objective world, whereas emotional responses represent the authentic expression of the viewer's inner thoughts.

3.2 Concept-Image of Plants: Representation of Romantic Emotions

As early as over two thousand years ago in the first anthology of Chinese poetry, *Shi Jing (The Book of Songs)*, Chinese ancestors had already imbued plants with rich and vivid cultural attributes, turning them into carriers of personality traits or aspirations for a better life [11]. While the Concept-Image of mountains and waters provided the spatial foundation for their understanding of the natural world, the romantic and metaphorical qualities of plants supplied the spiritual nourishment necessary for the elevation of their thoughts.

Take bamboo as an example. The renowned literary figure of the Song Dynasty, Su Dongpo (1037-1101), once remarked, "It is preferable to live without meat than without bamboo. Lack of meat makes one thin, but lack of bamboo makes one vulgar". This vividly illustrates the significant status bamboo holds in the hearts of ancient Chinese people. There are three reasons for this phenomenon: First, bamboo remains verdant throughout the year and grows upward in segments, symbolizing unwavering commitment to ideals and beliefs despite external influences. Second, bamboo stands tall and straight, representing the aspiration to rise above the thorny and mundane

aspects of society. Third, bamboo possesses a resilient texture that can only be broken, not bent arbitrarily by external forces. Furthermore, the crisp sound it emits when broken resembles the final cry of someone who has been persecuted, aligning closely with the concept of integrity highly valued in ancient Chinese ideology.

In the context of traditional Chinese aesthetics, the perception of plant Concept-Image not only reflects the externalization of personal ideals and pursuits but also embodies a metaphorical and romantic approach to appreciating scenery. Furthermore, it excels in achieving the artistic transformation of objective images through the integration of diverse Concept-Image elements. For instance, in *Yuan Ye (The Craft of Gardens)*, the sole ancient Chinese treatise on garden design, when portraying summer garden scenery, it states: "The night rain falling on banana plants resembles the intermingling of mermaid tears; the morning breeze brushing through willows evokes the graceful swaying of barbarian girls' slender waists". This description avoids explicit references to season or space yet vividly captures the essence of summer scenery. This exemplifies the synergy between "Emotional Connotation" and "Image", as illustrated in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. The willows beside the Slender West Lake

3.3 Concept-Image of Animals: The Anthropomorphization of Animals and the Aerivation of their Spiritual Values

In traditional Chinese gardens, animals serve as the most dynamic elements. Compared with mountains, water, and plants, they more effectively fulfill the traditional Chinese garden's goal of replicating the authentic natural world. Historical records indicate that approximately two thousand years ago, there existed gardens such as the Rabbit Garden, the Monkey-Leaping Rock, the Wild Goose Pond, and the Crane Island, which primarily focused on domesticated animals. Of course, these recorded landscapes were likely exclusive spaces for the nobility to keep animals. However, as culture evolved, animals—much like plants—were gradually personified. Certain material attributes of animals were metaphorically extended into spiritual qualities, thereby symbolizing people's aspirations and pursuits for a beautiful life or an idealized world.

Chinese architectural art excels in incorporating animal motifs into garden settings through decorative architecture. While this practice bears some resemblance to the use of plant patterns, animal motifs typically do not appear extensively in painted forms. Instead, they are often manifested through carvings or mosaics on architectural components or flooring. These motifs carry cultural connotations and emotional signifi-

cance akin to those of real animals. Moreover, when combined with other decorative elements, they can convey more precise themes and evoke richer imagery perceptions, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. The animal images and their corresponding imagery perceptions in Wanzhu Garden

Carvings	Animal Images	Imagery Perceptions
	Lion	In traditional Chinese culture, the lion was a mythical beast with a protective role, embodying the dual values of feng shui and art. In architecture or gardens, lions usually appear in pairs, representing male and female, and symbolize power, wealth, and auspiciousness.
	Tiger	Tigers are renowned for their strength and bravery, and were therefore considered symbols of power and courage. Like lions, they were believed to have a protective role for the family. As hunters, tigers symbolize wealth, luck, power, and status.
	Rooster	The rooster was characterized by its bravery and vigilance, daring to face various challenges. Additionally, the rooster's punctual crowing at sunrise made it a symbol of trustworthiness and punctuality. More importantly, in Chinese, the word for *"ji"* (rooster) is a homophone for *"ji"* (auspicious), therefore, it was also regarded as a symbol of good fortune.
	Crane	The crane served as a representative element in ancient Chinese Taoist culture, symbolizing immortals, longevity, wealth, purity, and mystical spirituality. It embodied the ancients' aspiration and pursuit of a serene life detached from the mundane world, possessing rich aesthetic value and cultural heritage significance.
	Bat	In ancient China, bats were known as *"fu"* (bat), which had the same pronunciation as the character for *"fu"* (good fortune). Therefore, they were considered symbols of good luck. Additionally, their nocturnal activities and upside-down perching habits added a sense of mystery and reverence to these creatures.

By employing the symbolic, homophonic, and metaphorical techniques of natural objects to express human thoughts and emotions through material forms, ancient China developed a distinctive artistic tradition. Incorporating animal motifs into various architectural elements not only alleviates the monotony of structures but also deepens the cultural significance of garden spaces. The emotional resonance evoked by these motifs, combined with the Concept-Image of mountains, water, and plants, facilitates the artistic and spiritual transformation of natural elements. This process enabled the ancient Chinese to transition fully from primitive nature worship to the material manifestation of an advanced spiritual civilization.

3.4 Concept-Image of Humanistic: A Visual Manifestation of Spiritual Civilization and Traditional Culture

In the aesthetic system of Chinese classical garden art, while the core of landscape creation lies in the realm of natural mountains and waters expressed through all living things, the core of emotional expression is the unique cultural communication method formed by the ancients through poetry. In addition to mountains, waters, animals, and plants, humanistic elements also constitute an essential part of the garden environment, serving as a more direct means to reveal the cultural depth of the garden space.

The humanistic elements in classical gardens primarily include couplets, plaques, and decorative patterns that depict specific storylines (mainly realized through wood carvings, stone carvings, and brick carvings). These elements convey precise and rich cultural content through both text and imagery, thereby deepening the ideological significance and cultural breadth of individual symbolic elements. They also provide crucial positive support for the functioning of the garden's spatial image aesthetic mechanism. This phenomenon owes much to the influence of ancient Chinese literature, drama, and painting, which have transformed certain images from mere landscape elements into specific aesthetic symbols. These symbols not only express the garden owner's philosophical reflections on life but also stimulate and guide the psychological responses of viewers, as illustrated in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. The plaque and couplet in the Humble Administrator's Garden

3.5 Concept-Image of Furnishings: The External Manifestation of the Agreeable Life

In addition to landscape design and architectural decoration, attention must also be given to the embellishment and beautification of garden and architectural spaces. The arrangement of furniture, calligraphy, paintings, antiques, handicrafts, and stationery serves as a key method for achieving this goal. As the saying goes, scholars examine life through an artistic lens and create new lifestyles through artistic design, ultimately fostering a refined living environment. Gardens thus become the embodiment of both the artification of life and the integration of art into daily living.

More importantly, beyond their inherent aesthetic qualities, furnishings in garden living environments play a crucial role in shaping the overall perception of the space. Together with elements such as mountains, waters, plants, animals, and cultural artifacts, they form a cohesive spatial experience, enriching the content and enhancing the vitality of the garden living environment while evoking scenes of scholars' idealized lifestyles. As shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4. The Wufeng Study Room of The Master of the Nets Garden

Consequently, these furnishings transcend their mere material function and, influenced by scholarly tastes, evolve into symbolic representations of aesthetic values. Like other elements such as natural scenery and cultural symbols, they constitute integral components of the aesthetic mechanism within the scholar's garden living environment [12].

4 Conclusion

In summary, the unique social background of the late Ming Dynasty laid the foundation for the special mindset, ideals, and lifestyle preferences of the citizens in their garden living. It also made the aesthetic characteristics, cultural connotations, and emotional orientations of various material elements in the garden space increasingly distinct.

These material elements, influenced by culture and ideology, developed unique aesthetic characteristics and emotional orientations, which gradually evolved into a rich “Aesthetic Symbol System” through gardening artistic practice. This system laid the material and linguistic foundation for the occurrence of mental activities and emotional experiences, thereby facilitating the formation of “Aesthetic Psychological Images”. In the garden environment, the combination of “Emotional Connotation” and “Image” was embodied in the integration of the “Aesthetic Psychological Images” generated by the garden owner and viewers with the “Aesthetic Symbol System” formed by gardening elements. Essentially, it was the mutual reflection between the subject's thoughts and emotions and the real world, a reflection that was constantly reinforced in the process of ancient garden living. Overall, the “Aesthetic System of Concept-Image” in the garden living environment, under the coupling of “Emotional Connotation” and

"Image", could be understood as a special aesthetic connection between subjective emotions and objective objects. It based on ancient Chinese cultural thoughts and structured by Concept-Image theory, and took garden living as the premise and the garden environment as the spatial carrier, mainly manifesting as a process of mutual reflection between the subject's inner activities and the real world, as shown in Fig. 5.

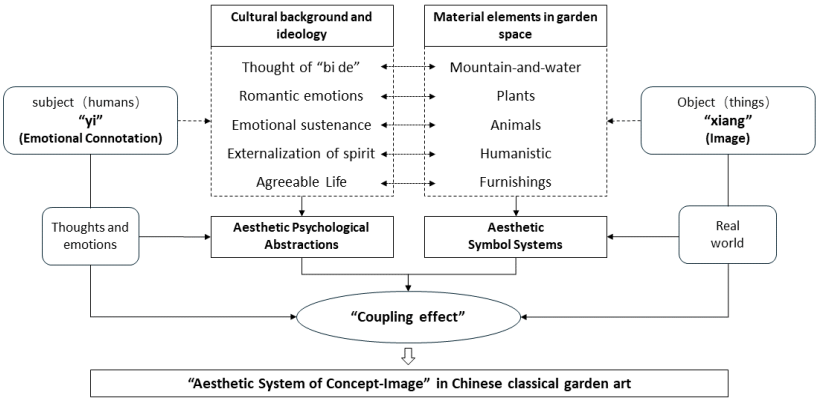

Fig. 5. The formation of the "Aesthetic System of Concept-Image" in Chinese classical garden art under the coupling of "Emotional Connotation" and "Image"

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