

Exploring the Relationship Between Women's Garden Life and Garden Space in "Yongzheng Twelve Beauties"

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the intrinsic connection between women's garden living and garden space in the Qing Palace collection "Twelve Beauties of Yongzheng." The "Twelve Beauties of Yongzheng" depicts the leisurely activities of 12 palace women in gardens, such as tea-drinking, reading, contemplation, and butterfly-watching. As the backdrop for these activities, the layout and features of garden spaces reflect the needs and aesthetic preferences of women. By analyzing the landscaping elements in the paintings and their interplay with female activities, this study reveals how these elements collectively create a harmonious garden environment. Through spatial enclosure and seasonal analysis, the research investigates how different spatial types influenced women's garden life, highlighting the seasonal variations in garden aesthetics and women's activities. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the interdependent relationship between women's garden living and garden space, which not only embodies the harmony between humans and nature but also mirrors the societal aesthetics and values of the time.

Keywords

Yongzheng Twelve Beauties; Women's garden life; Garden space; Landscape construction.

1. Introduction

With social progress and the rising status of women, future environmental design will increasingly focus on female needs and experiences. In landscape architecture, scholars have begun exploring the relationship between women and gardens. Wu Ruo bing and Du Yan interpreted garden spaces from the perspective of functional expression and feminine traits; Liu Shanshan and Huang Xiao examined garden paintings to discuss how garden spaces shaped female growth and character; Du Chun lan and Kuai Chang studied how ancient women used gardens as emotional sanctuaries, deepening the significance of gardens for women. Chen Shi yu and Chen Yi wei analyzed Ming Dynasty female garden fragrances and emotions through dramas like *The Purple Hairpin* and *The Peony Pavilion*, reconstructing the olfactory landscapes of women's gardens.

Paintings and gardens share aesthetic resonance, both pursuing the fusion of natural and humanistic beauty while emphasizing emotional expression. Depictions of women in garden settings reflect their experiences and needs, offering insights into their behavioral patterns and psychological demands in public spaces. This understanding can inform the design of female-friendly environments.

The "Yongzheng Twelve Beauties" series vividly portrays courtly elegance and the integration of women's lives with gardens during the Ming and Qing dynasties. These paintings not only document women's daily activities but also subtly reveal how garden spaces served imperial leisure and residential needs. As invaluable historical materials, they provide a unique lens to

analyze the spatial layout and functions of gardens, uncovering the intrinsic connection between women's garden life and garden space.

2. Overview of "Yongzheng Twelve Beauties"

2.1. Historical Background and Introduction

According to Qing imperial archives, the "Yongzheng Twelve Beauties" was originally displayed as a folding screen in the Shenliu Reading Hall of the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan). Later, Emperor Yongzheng preserved the set. The silk paintings lack artist signatures, but one features calligraphy inscribed with Yongzheng's pseudonyms, "Pochen Jushi" and "YuanMingZhuRen," alongside seals from his princely era (Kangxi 48th year). After receiving Yuanmingyuan as a princely estate from Emperor Kangxi, Yongzheng likely commissioned these paintings, which are now housed in the Palace Museum, Beijing.

The set, also known as Yinzhen's Beauties, comprises 12 silk scrolls, each measuring 184 cm × 98 cm. Executed in meticulous brushwork and rich colors, they blend courtly grandeur with the elegance of traditional beauty paintings. Each scroll depicts a Han-clad palace woman engaged in activities like "Admiring the Mirror in Fur," "Viewing Snow by the Stove," "Leaning on a Door to Observe Bamboo," and "Sipping Tea Under a Parasol Tree." Beyond their artistic merit, these works offer historical insights into Qing court life, illustrating the harmonious integration of classical gardens with female existence.

3. Types and Characteristics of Women's Garden Life in the Paintings

In traditional Chinese society, women often resided in secluded rear gardens—serene, intricate spaces that mirrored their inner worlds. Scholarly studies categorize women's garden activities into daily labor, leisure, and cultural pursuits. The "Twelve Beauties" emphasizes leisure and cultural activities, reflecting the refined lifestyles of court women.

3.1. Leisure Activities and Environmental Features

The paintings depict solitary leisure activities such as admiring flowers, watching butterflies, and playing with cats. These static, introspective pursuits highlight an appreciation for natural beauty. For example, Summer Butterfly Appreciation juxtaposes a woman's quiet contemplation with vibrant garden elements like hollyhocks and gourds, symbolizing wishes for offspring. Architectural elements like moon gates, lattice windows, and railings catered to women's mobility constraints, creating delicate, feminine spaces.

3.2. Cultural Activities and Environmental Features

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, cultural activities like tea ceremonies, reading, and antique (appreciation) became integral to women's lives. In Tea Under the Parasol Tree, a woman sits beneath a lush tree, surrounded by books and tea utensils, symbolizing scholarly refinement. Beauty Reading portrays a woman pausing over a book, with calligraphy and landscapes adorning the walls, blending courtly elegance with rustic simplicity.

4. Analysis of Garden Spaces in the Paintings

Traditional garden paintings transcend mere representation, embodying poetic ideals and cultural symbolism. Elements like plants, rocks, and architecture collectively construct idealized natural havens.

4.1. Landscaping Elements

Plants

Species like peonies, roses, and bamboos enhance visual experiences. In *Leaning on a Door to Observe Bamboo*, bamboo symbolizes complementing the woman's grace.

Rocks:

Strategically placed rocks add texture and spatial division. In *Sewing Candlelight*, rocks separate indoor and outdoor spaces, creating layered depth.

Architecture:

Moon gates, pavilions, and corridors enrich spatial dynamics. Eight paintings feature moon gates, framing activities like tea-drinking and snow-viewing, and symbolizing harmony and perfection.

4.2. Spatial Characteristics

Garden spaces are categorized as closed (e.g., indoor scenes in *Admiring the Mirror*), open (e.g., courtyards in *Holding a Ruyi Scepter*), and semi-closed (e.g., *Summer Butterfly Appreciation's* shaded verandas). These spaces balance privacy and openness, reflecting seasonal and functional adaptability.

In female-themed paintings, garden spaces can be categorized into three types based on the degree of architectural enclosure: enclosed garden spaces, open garden spaces, and semi-enclosed garden spaces. Among the twelve paintings, the spatial characteristics of gardens are divided as follows: the first type is enclosed garden spaces; the second is open garden spaces; and the third is semi-enclosed garden spaces.

Enclosed garden spaces

Enclosed garden spaces typically refer to inward-oriented environments bounded by at least four enclosed surfaces, such as pavilions, rooms, chambers, or towers. These spaces exhibit strong visual and auditory isolation, offering heightened privacy and territoriality, thereby providing occupants with a secluded environment free from external disturbances. In the *Twelve Beauties of Yongzheng*, enclosed garden spaces are primarily manifested in the indoor settings where the beauties reside and engage in activities. These spaces are isolated from the outside world through architectural elements like high walls, doors, and windows, forming an independent, enclosed microcosm.

Open garden activity spaces

Open garden activity spaces in palace gardens feature sparse vegetation and strategically placed rocks, collectively presenting a relatively open environment. Within these spaces, women engaged in activities such as admiring fragrant orchids and peonies, sipping tea in shaded areas, appreciating bamboo and rock arrangements, plucking flowers, participating in herb competitions, and chasing butterflies. In the painting *Holding the Ruyi Scepter*, a court lady stands in a courtyard holding a bamboo-carved ruyi scepter while admiring blossoms. The courtyard brims with flowers and plants, accented by bamboo groves and rocks.

Semi-enclosed garden spaces

Semi-enclosed garden spaces are partially enclosed yet retain selective transparency in certain areas. They are defined by elements such as railings, plants, rocks, and garden furniture, which demarcate the boundary between interior and exterior spaces, creating a semi-private environment tailored for women. Unlike fully enclosed spaces that prioritize absolute privacy, these semi-enclosed areas balance seclusion with controlled openness, embodying a nuanced approach to spatial design.

4.3. Seasonal Analysis

The paintings subtly encode seasonal cues through attire, flora, and activities. Spring scenes feature blooming peonies; summer highlights shaded retreats; autumn celebrates chrysanthemums symbolizing resilience; winter juxtaposes plum blossoms and snow,

embodying hope amid austerity. Seasonal influences lead to corresponding shifts in the figures' activities. By analyzing the court ladies' attire, flora, fauna, and seasonal motifs depicted in the paintings, the beauty portraits are categorized into the four seasons.

5. Interrelationship Between Women's Garden Life and Space

Garden spaces served as platforms for self-expression and cultural Activities like tea ceremonies and reading infused gardens with intellectual and emotional depth, transforming them into dynamic, lived environments. Conversely, women's presence imbued gardens with grace and vitality, reinforcing the harmony between humanity and nature.

6. Conclusion

The "Yongzheng Twelve Beauties" illustrates how garden spaces both shaped and were shaped by women's lives. Through meticulous spatial and seasonal analysis, this study reveals the symbiotic relationship between female agency and garden design reflecting broader societal values and aesthetic ideals. These paintings transcend documentation, offering profound insights into the interplay of gender, culture, and nature in Qing courtly life.

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