

A Study on the "Fanxiangwu" Pattern in Wen Zhengming's "Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden"

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Abstract

Wen Zhengming's 《Zhuozheng Garden Album》 was created in the 12th year of the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty (1533), when Wen Zhengming was 64 years old. At the invitation of Wang Xianchen, the owner of Zhuozheng Garden, Wen painted the garden's landscapes and composed poems for the newly constructed garden. Each painting features the landscape name and a seven-character poem inscribed on the opposite page, integrating poetry, calligraphy, and painting to reflect the refined tastes of a literati. The album employs a blend of realistic and expressive techniques, with meticulously detailed architecture and lively, spacious natural scenery, creating an atmosphere of "mountains and forests within a small space." This paper conducts a visual analysis and discussion of the Fanxiangwu landscape among the thirty-one scenes depicted.

Keywords

Zhuozheng Garden Atlas; Fanxiangwu; Garden Landscape; Architecture.

1. Introduction

The "Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden," created by Wen Zhengming at the invitation of its owner Wang Xianchen, exhibits an artistic style entirely distinct from other garden paintings. Many contemporary scholars regard it as a sophisticated collection of garden paintings. While substantial academic research has been conducted on this work, studies focusing on the "Fanxiangwu" motif remain limited. This paper aims to analyze the architectural stylistic characteristics of the Humble Administrator's Garden by examining its compositional elements from an architectural perspective.

2. The "Zhuozheng Garden Atlas" and Fanxiangwu

In the twelfth year of the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty (1533), Wen Zhengming—then well into his sixties—accepted an invitation from Wang Xianchen, the owner of the Humble Administrator's Garden and his former friend who had resigned from office to live in seclusion. He devoted himself to constructing the garden and meticulously created a series of landscape illustrations. These paintings not only captured the thirty-one scenic views of the garden in its initial form through brushwork but also featured poetic inscriptions of seven-character verses that complemented each illustration, making them masterpieces blending poetry, calligraphy, and painting. In 1551, Wen Zhengming selected twelve scenes from the original thirty-one views in his album 《The Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden》 and reinterpreted them into a new album page. Eight of these twelve scenes survive today: Fanxiangwu, Xiaocanglang, Diaoyuan, Laiqinyou, Xiangyunwu, Bajiaojian, Yuquan, and Huaiwu. This album reflects the artist's aspiration for spiritual tranquility, integrates his artistic pursuits and philosophy of garden design, and demonstrates that faithfully reproducing the garden's actual appearance was not the primary goal of Ming painters and garden owners in landscape painting. Instead, literati artists placed greater emphasis on conveying an abstract, transcendent aesthetic experience beyond mere visual representation.

The landscapes, plants, and architectural elements depicted in the 《Zhuozheng Garden Album》 exhibit meticulous realism—every detail, from vegetation placement and building designs to courtyard layouts, is rendered with exceptional precision. This confirms that the work was modeled after the actual Zhuozheng Garden. The painting 《Fanxiangwu》 captures the quintessential ambiance of Ming-era literati gardens through refined ink techniques. This monochrome silk painting (29.2 cm × 27.5 cm) centers on the seal script inscription 《Fanxiangwu》 which defines its theme. The waterside cottage features a suspended gable roof with fully open wooden lattice windows and clearly visible pillars, embodying its simple yet elegant architecture. In the foreground, rugged rocks slope downward while an ancient plum tree leans against the water's edge; its gnarled branches are rendered in light ink strokes, serving both as a compositional anchor and spatial foundation. The middle ground displays vibrant peach and plum blossoms in clusters, their petals falling onto the water's surface through varied ink tones and dot-and-stroke techniques, creating an illusion of fragrance drifting with the ripples. The water's surface is depicted with fluid, dynamic brushstrokes resembling flowing clouds and water, producing shimmering ripples that harmonize with the dynamic interplay of falling petals.



Figure 1: Fanxiangwu from Wen Zhengming's "The Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden"

The three figures within the garden exhibit meticulous compositions: one leans against a railing admiring flowers with serene contemplation; another holds a scroll ready for reading, lost in communion with nature; the third gazes into the distance from a table, as if hearing orioles

singing. This scene transcends ordinary leisurely sightseeing—it vividly captures the elegant gathering of garden master Wang Xianchen and his literary friends amidst the poetic imagery of "thousands of blossoms flourishing through all seasons." The distant landscape is rendered with subtle brushstrokes of mist, subtly revealing the undulating spring mountains and skillfully expanding the visual depth, seamlessly blending the garden's surroundings into the painting. Centered around architectural structures as the foundation, adorned with floral and arboreal elements as visual highlights, and enhanced by water and cloud motifs as atmospheric accents, the work masterfully conveys both the physical space described as "the front courtyard planted with exotic flowers that shine like jade blossoms during bloom" and the sensory experience of "sitting or lying amidst them while contemplating the sun's passage." It perfectly embodies the Ming Dynasty literati's aesthetic pursuit of encapsulating the grandeur of Mount Sumeru within a modest garden, providing an invaluable visual model for understanding the botanical composition and spatial poetics of Ming-era gardens.

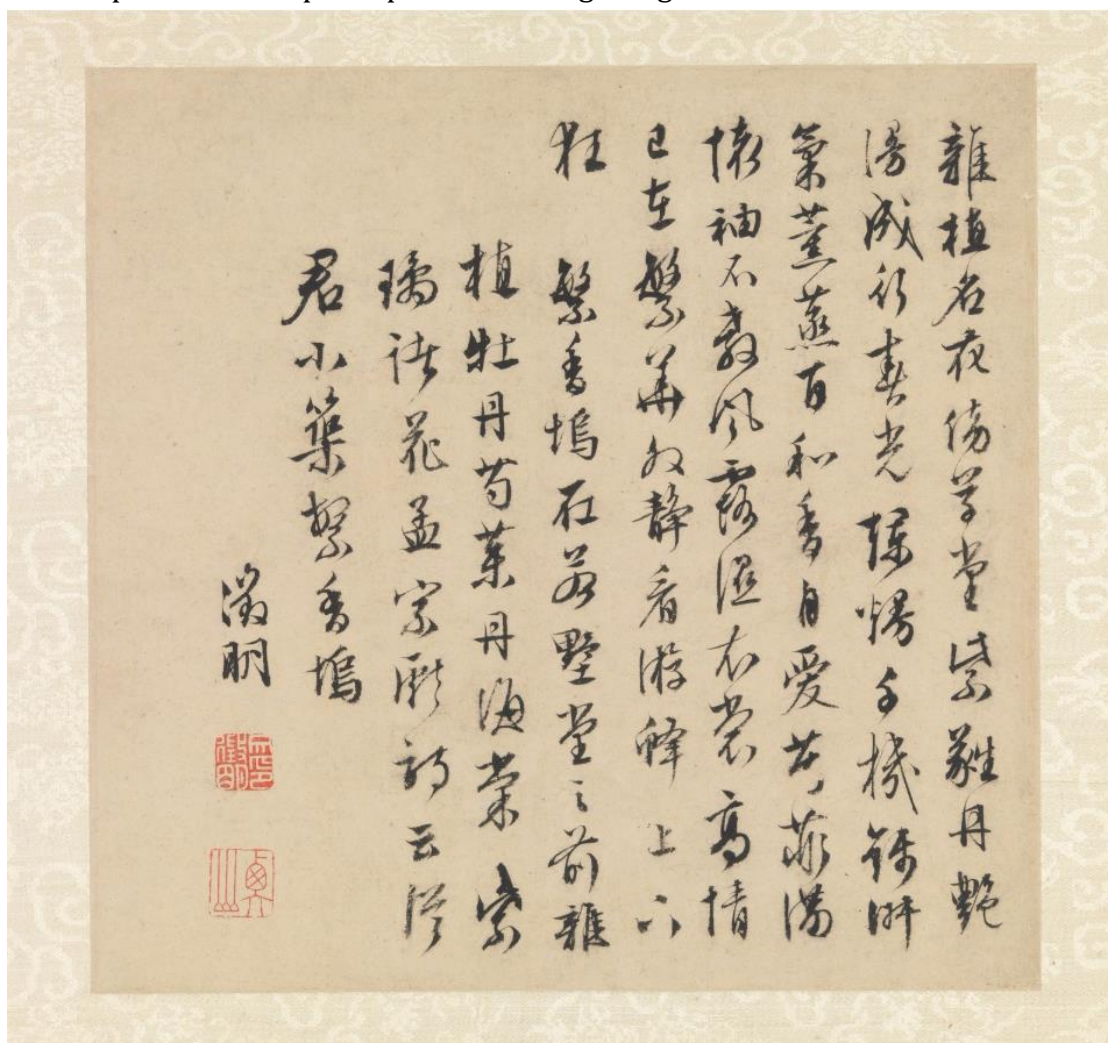


Figure 2: Fanxiangwu from Wen Zhengming's "The Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden"

3. A Brief Analysis of the Architecture of Fanxiangwu

Wen Zhengming's album 《Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden》, created in 1533 during the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty, artistically captures the original landscape of the garden, with the "Fanjingwu" (Fragrant Garden) scene standing out particularly. Located before the Ruoshu Hall, this area is renowned for its diverse floral planting. According to Wen

Zhengming's poem and preface, it "features mixed cultivation of peonies, tree peonies, osmanthus, crabapples, and purple orchids," and during spring when flowers bloom, "the vibrant light resembles a thousand silk fabrics, while the gentle fragrance permeates the air," earning its name. The painting reveals that Fanjingwu is not an independent hall but a landscape complex built around a thatched cottage adorned with flowers. Its architecture is simple: the cottage features a overhanging gable roof covered with grass or plain tiles, bamboo and wood frameworks, plaster-clad walls, and open designs with lattice or floor-to-ceiling windows for scenic appreciation and ventilation. The layout integrates seamlessly with the floral garden, embodying the Ming-era garden philosophy of "learning from nature" and "uniting scenery with architecture." The flowers are arranged strategically according to the terrain, creating a harmonious sequence of "vibrant purple and crimson blossoms in orderly rows," while the buildings blend naturally among the blooms, evoking the impression of "artificial yet naturally formed." Construction materials primarily include local bamboo, wood, thatch, and plain clay, with colors dominated by natural tones that contrast sharply with the floral splendor, reflecting the Suzhou gardens' aesthetic of seclusion and elegance.

4. The Evolution of the Fanchiangwu Architecture in the "Zhuozheng Garden Atlas"

The evolutionary process of the architectural form of "Fanxiangwu" in the "Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden" reflects the transformation of construction philosophies and socio-cultural changes in China's classical gardens over centuries, from the Ming Dynasty to the present day. In the album leaf painted by Wen Zhengming in the twelfth year of the Jiajing reign (1533), Fanxiangwu embodies the typical paradigm of Ming literati gardens: the architecture centers around a thatched cottage with a overhanging gable roof covered in thatch or simple tiles, walls constructed with bamboo-wood frameworks plastered with mud, and featuring balustrade windows or floor-to-ceiling long windows, presenting an overall simple and natural appearance. This architectural style aligns closely with the scholar-official identity of Wang Xianchen, who had retired from official duties, embodying the Ming garden philosophy of "prioritizing scenery over architecture." The buildings are nestled among vibrant flowers, harmonizing with peonies, tree peonies, osmanthus, and other blooms to create an artistic realm that appears "as if crafted by nature itself," reflecting the Ming literati's admiration for seclusion and their pursuit of natural elegance.

Since the Qing Dynasty, the architectural style of the Humble Administrator's Garden underwent significant transformations alongside changes in garden ownership and evolving social functions. During the Qianlong reign, the original site of Fanxiangwu gradually integrated into a new landscape system, with the Yuanxiangtang at its center becoming the dominant structure. This building features a single-eave hip-and-gable roof, a three-bay width, surrounding corridors, exquisitely decorated floor-to-ceiling windows, and intricate interior patterns, embodying an overall style that shifted toward opulence and solemnity. This evolution reflects the Qing Dynasty's transition in garden architecture—from simplicity to luxury, and from standalone structures to collective complexes. After the garden was divided into Chinese and Western sections during the Jiaqing era, the Western Yuan-Yang Hall—comprising thirty-six Mandarin Duck Pavilions and eighteen Mandala Flower Pavilions—adopted intricate carved decorations and stained glass windows. Its interior spaces were meticulously divided through lattice partitions and hanging panels, enhancing its social and recreational functions. This architectural transformation mirrors the functional evolution of Jiangnan gardens during the Qing period, shifting from private retreats to venues for social interaction and display.

Since modern times, the Humble Administrator's Garden has undergone a more complex process of transformation. In the tenth year of the Xianfeng reign (1860), the Taiping Rebellion caused severe damage to the garden. When Zhang Zhiwan, the Governor of Jiangsu, rebuilt it in the tenth year of the Tongzhi reign (1871), he attempted to restore its original appearance, but the architectural style had already incorporated characteristics of the late Qing period. In the third year of the Guangxu reign (1877), when Zhang Lūqian acquired the western expansion known as the "Bu Garden," the building density increased significantly; structures such as the Pagoda Shadow Pavilion and the Listening Pavilion grew larger in scale, and their decorations became more elaborate. The evolution of architecture during this period was characterized by two key aspects: on one hand, it continued the ornate style of the Qing dynasty; on the other hand, due to the reduced garden area (down to just 1.2 hectares), the "within a garden" technique was employed to enhance spatial depth, resulting in more compact architectural arrangements—for example, the Xiaocanglang Water Court consists of multiple pavilions, terraces, and covered bridges.

After the establishment of the new China, the Humble Administrator's Garden underwent systematic restoration and preservation. During the renovation in 1951, the principle of "restoring the old as it was" was adhered to; however, vanished landscapes such as the Ming Dynasty's Fanxiangwu were not restored, with the focus instead placed on preserving the existing Qing Dynasty architectural complex. Following its designation as one of the first National Key Cultural Heritage Protection Units in 1961, architectural conservation placed greater emphasis on historical authenticity. The comprehensive survey and restoration project initiated in the late 1980s employed traditional craftsmanship and materials to restore certain Ming Dynasty characteristics of the buildings, such as the restoration of the wooden framework of Yuanxiang Hall, which highlighted the Ming Dynasty's minimalist style. Nevertheless, due to incomplete historical records, the exact architectural layout of Fanxiangwu could not be fully reconstructed, and its precise location remains a subject of academic debate.

The contemporary architecture of the Humble Administrator's Garden exhibits a multi-layered historical layering: structures such as the Lanxue Hall and Furong Pavilion in the eastern section were newly constructed in 1959 in imitation of Ming-style architecture; the Yuanxiang Hall and Xiaofei Hong Pavilion in the central section retain their Qing Dynasty main structures but have undergone multiple restorations; while the Thirty-Six Mandarin Duck Pavilions in the western section largely preserve their original late Qing appearance. This temporal and spatial layering of the architecture makes the Humble Administrator's Garden a living museum showcasing the evolution of China's garden architecture. In 2004, the garden was inscribed on the World Heritage List, with its architectural conservation placing greater emphasis on integrity and authenticity. Recent monitoring and preventive conservation projects have employed 3D scanning and digital modeling technologies to establish a detailed architectural archive database.

The architectural evolution of Fanxiangwu reveals the centuries-long developmental characteristics of the Humble Administrator's Garden: its functional role shifted from scenic appreciation and contemplation to social display; its architectural forms evolved from simple, solitary structures to elaborate group compositions; its materials and craftsmanship progressed from natural simplicity to refined artificiality; and its spatial organization transitioned from being integrated into the landscape to dominating the visual sequence. This process not only reflects the socio-economic and cultural transformations in the Jiangnan region but also demonstrates the self-renewal capacity of China's classical garden architecture. Today, the Humble Administrator's Garden retains its layered characteristics from different historical periods while achieving a dialogue between tradition and modernity through scientific conservation, making it a vital model for studying the history of Chinese garden architecture.

5. A Comparative Study of the Ancient and Modern Fanchiangwu in the "Zhuozheng Garden Atlas"

Compared with the existing Humble Administrator's Garden, the original site of Fanchiangwu no longer exists—it may have been integrated into later landscape renovations. Today, the central section of the garden centers around the Yuanxiang Hall, whose northern platform features an expansive area with clear pond water and summer breezes carrying lotus fragrance, embodying Zhou Dunyi's poetic concept of "fragrance spreading far and growing clearer." While retaining the tradition of naming structures after plant aromas, the architectural form and function have undergone significant transformation. Built during the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, the Yuanxiang Hall features a single-eave hip-and-gable roof, three-bay width, and is surrounded by corridors adorned with exquisite floor-to-ceiling windows and intricate interior patterns, exuding a luxurious yet solemn elegance that contrasts sharply with the simple style of Ming-era Fanchiangwu's thatched cottages. Moreover, the current garden exhibits markedly increased architectural density—reaching 16.3% in the central area—with more clustered structures and winding courtyard layouts. For instance, the Xiaocanglang Pond evolved from a single Ming-era waterside pavilion into a water courtyard complex comprising Xiaofei Hong, Dezhen Pavilion, and Zhiqing Yiyuan Pavilion, all connected by bridges and corridors along the water. These changes reflect the shift in garden architecture from individual structures to clustered complexes and from open layouts to denser configurations since the Qing Dynasty. Although floral planting remains important, it is no longer the sole focus; architectural design has assumed greater prominence. The Yuan' yang Hall, composed of the Western Thirty-Six Mandarin Duck Pavilions and Eighteen Mandala Flower Pavilions, employs partition screens and decorative panels to create multifunctional spaces that emphasize both aesthetic appeal and social interaction.

Through comparative analysis, it can be concluded that the architectural development of the Humble Administrator's Garden evolved from the Ming Dynasty's principle of "prioritizing scenery over architecture" to the Qing Dynasty and modern era's emphasis on "equal importance for both architecture and landscape." The Fanchiangwu Garden from the Ming period exemplifies the early architectural characteristics of the Humble Administrator's Garden—where structures served the natural scenery, featuring simple forms, unadorned materials, and seamless integration with flora, water features, and rockeries, reflecting the literati's reclusive ideals and pursuit of natural beauty. The existing architecture, however, reflects the social and commercial transformation of garden functions since the Qing Dynasty, with buildings becoming vehicles for displaying wealth, status, and social status. Architectural styles became more opulent, group compositions increased, and spatial layers grew more complex; structures like the Lanxue Hall and Furong Pavilion in the eastern section are modern reconstructions that attempt to restore the pastoral style but have lost the original Ming aesthetic. These changes stemmed from societal shifts, ownership transitions, and evolving aesthetic preferences. During the Qing-era Bazi Fengzhi Guild Hall period and Zhang Lūqian's renovation of the garden in the late Qing, expanded architectural scale and enhanced decorative elements were introduced to meet collective activity and residential needs. Simultaneously, the reduced garden area (down to 1.2 hectares during the Guangxu era) prompted designers to employ "gardens within gardens" and spatial division techniques to create a sense of grandeur within compact spaces, further intensifying architectural density and group organization.

A brief analysis indicates that the architectural development characteristics of the Humble Administrator's Garden can be summarized as follows: First, functionally, it shifted from private retreat to public social gathering, with buildings evolving from mere scenic spots into activity centers; second, in terms of form, it progressed from simple, single-unit structures to elaborate group compositions, featuring richer spatial layers; third, materials and decorations

evolved from natural simplicity to refined artificial designs, exemplified by the extensive use of Taihu stone rockeries and openwork window lattices; fourth, in landscape interaction, buildings transitioned from being integrated into nature to dominating the visual composition, as seen in the Yuanxiang Hall, where long window frames control the view, embodying the deliberate creation of "changing scenery with every step." Overall, the architectural transformation of the Humble Administrator's Garden reflects the transition of China's classical gardens from the Ming Dynasty's "freehand landscape painting" to the Qing Dynasty's "urban mountain forests," preserving the poetic and pictorial ambiance of literati gardens while incorporating practical demands of daily life, making it a valuable case study for understanding the evolution of Jiangnan garden architecture.

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