

# The Influence of Chinese Shanshui Culture on the Development of Gardens in China and Abroad

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## Abstract

This paper systematically examines the origin and development of Chinese shanshui culture and its influence on gardens in China and abroad. Adopting a comparative perspective between China and the West, the study reveals the differences and interactions between the two traditions across five dimensions: natural geography, philosophical thought, garden form, spiritual expression, and cross-cultural transmission. The results indicate that Western gardens, originating from open plains, emphasize human control over nature, while Chinese gardens, shaped by complex terrain, gave rise to the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity" and the pursuit of "learning from nature." At the material level, Chinese cities integrated mountains and waters into their macro-scale layouts, while literati created micro-scale gardens through expressive techniques. At the spiritual level, Chinese landscape poetry and painting distinguish themselves from Western traditions through "conveying emotion through scenery" and "changing scenery with each step." During the 17th–18th centuries, Chinese shanshui culture was introduced to Europe by missionaries, driving innovation in Western garden design. In the contemporary context, the concept of the "shanshui city" offers a vital pathway for the continuity of urban cultural heritage and sustainable development in China. As a spiritual legacy connecting tradition and modernity, East and West, Chinese shanshui culture holds significant theoretical and practical value.

## Keywords

Chinese shanshui culture; Chinese and Western gardens; harmony between heaven and humanity; learning from nature; shanshui city.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to exploring ways of integrating China's unique national culture into design. As a distinctive representative of Eastern aesthetics, Chinese *Shanshui* (mountain-and-water) culture has not only profoundly influenced the development of ancient Chinese cities and gardens but also played a significant role in the evolution of modern Western landscape gardens. At the same time, inheriting Chinese *Shanshui* aesthetics is of great significance for preserving the national character in future urban construction and green space development in China. This paper aims to explore the value of Chinese *Shanshui* culture by examining its origin and evolution, as well as the mutual exploration and exchange between East and West in this process.

### 1.1. The Genesis of Chinese Landscape Culture

China's *Shanshui*(mountain-and-water) culture has a long and profound history. Among the four great ancient civilizations, ancient Egypt, Babylonia, and India were long situated on open plains, lacking high mountains and relying on river irrigation. Consequently, when gardens

transitioned from practical to ornamental purposes, they tended to develop in a regular, geometric style. In contrast, the land of China—with its complex and varied topography shaped by surging rivers—was intimately connected with mountains and water from the very birth of its civilization, giving rise to a unique perception of landscape. The Chinese people revere and yearn for nature, and the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity" is deeply ingrained in their cultural DNA. Therefore, in garden making, the Chinese imitated natural landscapes: imperial gardens featured *lingtai* (spiritual terraces) and *lingchi* (spiritual ponds), while private gardens incorporated miniature rockeries built from piled stones.

## 2. The Development of Chinese Shanshui(Landscape) Culture in ancient times

Unlike the Western tradition, where nature and humanity are regarded as independent of each other, the connection between the Chinese people and *shanshui* is manifested not only on a material level but also on a spiritual level. The material dimension can be further divided into macro and micro scales. The macro scale encompasses natural landscapes and their influence on urban development, while the micro scale covers traditional garden spaces. The spiritual dimension of *shanshui* culture, in turn, includes landscape philosophy, landscape painting, landscape poetry, classical texts, and more.

### 2.1. The Influence of the Macro Scale of Material Shanshui(Landscape) Space on Gardens

China's recognition of material *shanshui* space is primarily embodied in the worship of mountains and waters themselves and in the communication between humans and nature. In addition, influenced by folk religious culture, the Chinese have often endowed famous mountains and great rivers with sacred dimensions, giving rise to cultural phenomena such as mountain gods, the Thirty-Two Grotto-Heavens of Daoism, and the Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism.

Furthermore, influenced by the macro-scale space of natural *shanshui*, the layout of ancient Chinese cities often deeply considered the role of mountains and waters, integrating the city with natural *shanshui* gardens. This gave rise to various spatial development patterns, such as "mountains outside the city," "mountains within the city," "unity of mountain and city," "water embracing the city," "water contained within the city," and "water flowing through the city." Of course, the three elements—"mountains," "waters," and "city"—form a composite relationship, closely interconnected with one another. For example, the city of Hangzhou integrated with the *shanshui* garden of West Lake, creating a pattern of "lake and mountain on one side, city on the other." Surrounded by the Qiantang River, it also gave rise to urban landscapes such as "Listening to the Tides at Qiantang." Meanwhile, the ancient capital of Nanjing, renowned for its "dragon-coiling, tiger-crouching majesty, backed by mountains and girdled by rivers," combined with the Purple Mountain and Xuanwu Lake within the city to create its distinctive landscapes. Cities not only integrated with the forms of *shanshui* gardens but also merged with their natural evolution, giving rise to diverse scenes across different times, such as the "Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers" and the "Ten Views of West Lake."

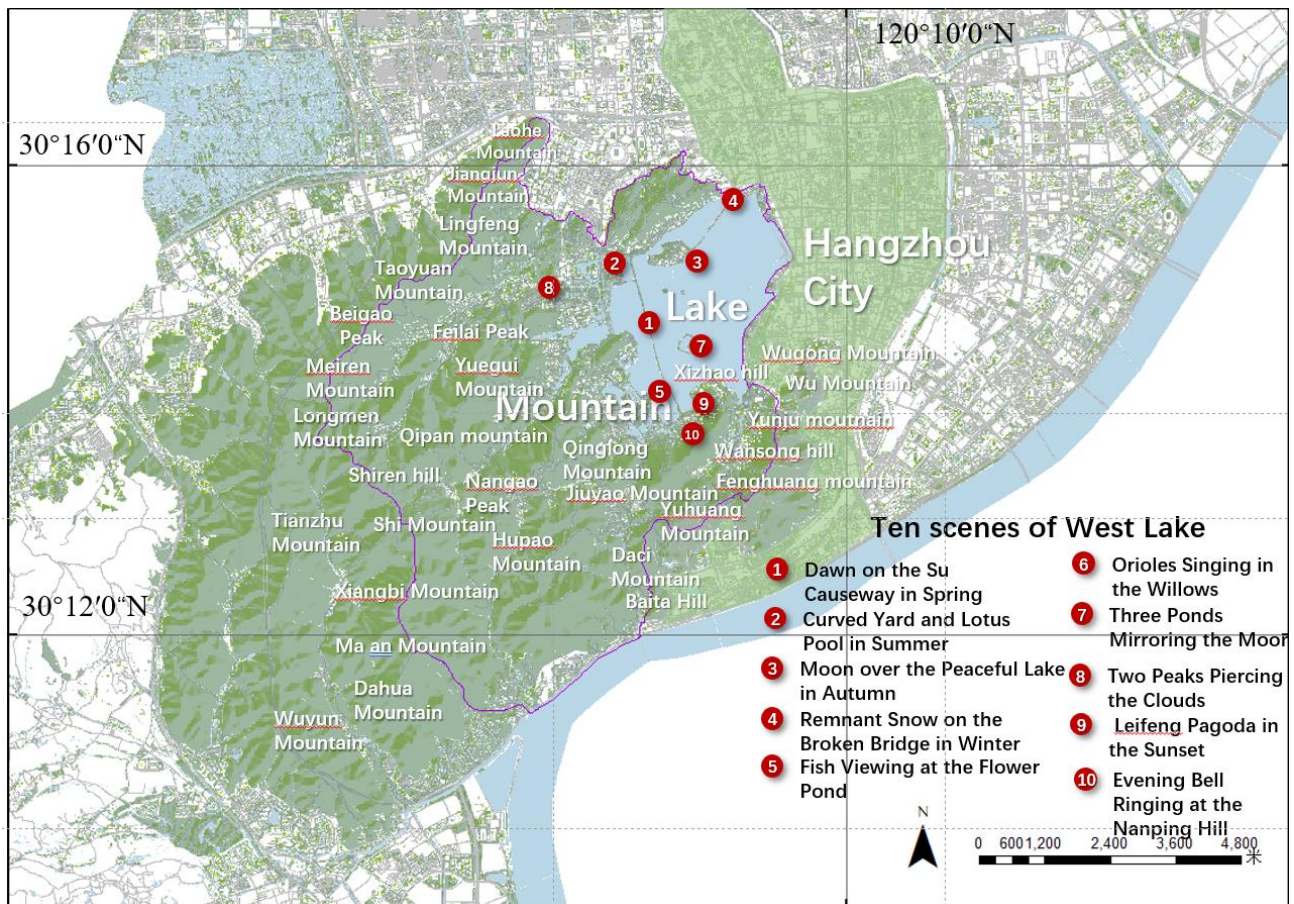


Figure 1: The mountain–water–city relationship of West Lake

## 2.2. The Influence of the Micro Scale of Material Shanshui (Landscape) Space on Gardens

For those who live long in the city, although they can gaze upon the mountains and fields beyond the city walls through their windows, they can never truly immerse themselves in the forests—listening to the babbling streams or touching the rugged moss-covered rocks. In order to recreate the charm of mountains and forests within the limited space of the city, while still maintaining the convenience of daily life, some literati or officials with sufficient means and a yearning for nature adopted the expressive technique of "a fistful of stone as a mountain, a spoonful of water as a river" in their own courtyards or beside their studies, condensing natural landscapes into a confined space. They meticulously crafted a poetic atmosphere in which "the courtyard rises with half a hill and half a ravine, allowing the eye to reach the heart's imagination," enabling residents, though dwelling in the bustling city, to wander among hills and valleys through sight and fancy. Others pursued the grand effect of "a single peak rivaling the thousand-meter Mount Hua, a single spoonful evoking the vast rivers and lakes," so that "a half-mu garden possesses the imposing momentum of a thousand miles." This garden-making philosophy—seeing the great in the small and managing complexity through simplicity—not only satisfied the spiritual longing of the literati for natural landscapes but also accommodated the practicality of daily living. Thus was born China's unique private *shanshui* garden, which is not merely a creation of physical space, but also a poetic vessel for the dwelling of the soul.

The ancient Chinese regarded heaven, earth, and humans as one integrated whole. The bond between humans and nature was seen as the most fundamental manifestation of the harmony between heaven and humanity. By projecting the human spirit onto nature and, in turn, shaping natural landscapes with that spirit, a distinctively Chinese philosophy of *shanshui* emerged.

As early as the Yin-Shang period, China had already produced a classic devoted to the study of natural mountains and waters—the I Ching (Book of Changes). Its system of hexagrams is intimately connected with landscape orientation and the interplay of yin and yang, embodying a cosmology of "observing the patterns of heaven above and examining the geography below." Under the profound influence of the I Ching's thought, many later traditional gardens followed the principles of "modeling after heaven and earth, learning from nature" in their site selection, layout, and artistic conception. For example, the Imperial Garden of the Forbidden City in Beijing was designed according to the hexagram pattern of "Qian as heaven and Kun as earth" from the I Ching, using mountains and waters to symbolize heaven and earth, and arranging the layout to echo yin and yang—thereby embodying the garden aesthetic of "harmony between heaven and humanity".

In the subsequent development of *shanshui* culture, China gave birth to unique forms of landscape poetry and landscape painting. Unlike the common Western tradition of simply describing and praising nature—such as Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," where natural forces are invoked to express personal passion—Chinese landscape poetry embodies the philosophical wisdom of "harmony between heaven and humanity". It is not merely environmental description, but a means of conveying emotion through scenery, using mountains and waters to reflect the poet's circumstances, feelings, or interpersonal sentiments—as in the saying "the virtuous delight in mountains; the wise delight in waters." Moreover, landscape poetry was deeply intertwined with traditional garden construction: Tao Yuanming, after resigning from office and retiring to the countryside, wrote "Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence, I leisurely gaze at the southern mountains"; Wang Wei built his Wangchuan Villa amidst layered green mountains and left lines such as "Birds fly away without end, and the mountains are cloaked in autumn hues".

Similarly, Chinese landscape painting differs fundamentally from Western landscape painting. Although both employ perspective techniques, Western painting typically uses linear perspective, emphasizing the depth and realistic representation of a single scene. In contrast, Chinese landscape painting adopts scattered perspective, presenting multiple scenes and viewpoints within a continuous handscroll format. This "changing scenery with each step" approach not only expands spatial-temporal expression but also directly influenced the later construction of urban scenic sequences such as the "Ten Views" and "Eight Views"—a method of linking multiple scenic nodes into a unified imagery that became a hallmark of Eastern landscape culture.

### **3. The Influence of Chinese Shanshui Culture on Gardens in Modern and Contemporary Times**

Since modern times, Chinese *shanshui* culture has not only continued to influence the construction of domestic gardens but has also profoundly shaped Western garden design concepts. In the contemporary era, Eastern and Western garden design philosophies have merged, jointly contributing to the development of modern landscape architecture.

#### **3.1. The Influence of Chinese Shanshui (Landscape) Culture on Western Gardens**

The transmission of Chinese *shanshui* culture to the West can be divided into two major periods. The first period began after the 17th century, when improvements in transportation enabled large numbers of Western missionaries, explorers, and travelers to come to China and bring Chinese *shanshui* culture back to the Western world. The second period followed China's reform and opening-up, when an international "Sinology boom" emerged, providing an opportunity for the further dissemination and promotion of Chinese *shanshui* culture.

In the early modern period, Westerners first became acquainted with Eastern views of nature primarily through travelogues describing Chinese landscapes. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, Western scholarship began to conduct concrete and systematic research on Chinese *shanshui* culture. For instance, the renowned French sinologist Édouard Chavannes, in his work "Le T'ai Chan: Essai de Monographie d'un Culte Chinois (The Sacrifice to Mount Tai)", delved into the worship of the Five Sacred Mountains in China, observing that "the Chinese believe in the authoritative power of naturalism". The German missionary and sinologist Richard Wilhelm, in his book "Die Seele Chinas (The Soul of China)", compared Mount Tai to China's Mount Olympus, emphasizing its sacred status in the Chinese national spirit [6]. The American traveler William Edgar Geil proposed that the Chinese worship of sacred mountains represented by the Five Sacred Mountains had roots far beyond Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—originating instead in a primitive nature worship predating even Laozi and Confucius. These early Western studies not only deepened the West's understanding of Chinese *shanshui* culture but also laid the foundation for subsequent dialogue between Eastern and Western garden design philosophies.



Figure 2 :Tai Mountain

In the 20th century, Chinese *shanshui* culture further influenced modern Western landscape design. For example, American landscape architect Dan Kiley incorporated spatial narrative techniques from Chinese gardens into his designs, while British architect Geoffrey Bawa also drew upon the "changing scenery with each step compositional principle of Chinese landscape painting. It can be said that Chinese *shanshui* culture has evolved from an initial exotic imagination into an important source of inspiration for international landscape design.

In the field of classical gardens, the cultural exchange between China and the West during the 17th and 18th centuries gave rise to a "gardening craze" in Europe. A large number of European literati, painters, architects, and missionaries brought information about Chinese gardens back to Europe through writings, paintings, and drawings. This craze was particularly intense in France and England. In the late 17th century, England witnessed an aesthetic reform movement that emphasized "the representation of nature unadorned," and the Chinese garden philosophy of "learning from nature" perfectly aligned with this demand. For example, the British architect William Chambers, after learning about the Porcelain Tower of the Great Bao'en Temple in Nanjing, built a Chinese pagoda in Kew Gardens. The British diplomat and garden connoisseur

William Temple praised Chinese gardens for their intense visual pleasure and unique aesthetic experience. In addition, the French missionary Louis le Comte, in his *Nouveaux "Mémoires sur l'État Présent de la Chine (New Accounts of the Present State of China)"*, described in detail the layout and artistic conception of Suzhou gardens, sparking imitation of "Chinese-style" gardens among the French upper class. The German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann, although not directly referencing China, resonated with Eastern ideas in his reflections on the relationship between nature and art. Influenced by Chinese garden thought, the West gradually came to realize that humans and nature form an integral whole, and that humans are not the masters of nature. This shift in perception profoundly influenced Western plant arrangement, garden layout, and the overall concept of gardening.

In the modern era, Western academia has adopted multiple perspectives—including sociology, geography, architecture, and religious studies—to study Chinese shanshui culture. For example, American scholar Susan Naquin systematically documented pilgrimage activities on China's famous mountains, revealing the interplay between religious space and folk beliefs. Edwin Bernbaum, meanwhile, proposed shanshui as a specialized term for understanding China's natural landscapes and landscape painting, emphasizing its unique cultural connotations. Correspondingly, Chinese scholars such as Chen Congzhou, in his *Treatise on Gardens*, interpreted the spirit of shanshui from the perspective of garden aesthetics, while architect Wang Shu integrated the concept of "shanshui city" into his modern designs, reflecting a continuity from tradition to the contemporary era.

When studying Chinese shanshui culture, Western scholars often proceed from their own religious traditions, interpreting China's reverence for mountains and waters as "establishing a connection with the divine through nature." To some extent, this reflects a limitation in cultural perspective. In contrast, the indigenous Chinese concept of "unity of heaven and humanity" emphasizes a direct integration between humans and nature, rather than relying on divine mediation. Nevertheless, the Western approach to exploring the essential qualities of natural beauty in gardens—employing systematic, scientific methods such as viewshed analysis, ecological assessment, and data modeling to quantify aesthetic experience—is a rational spirit from which we can learn.

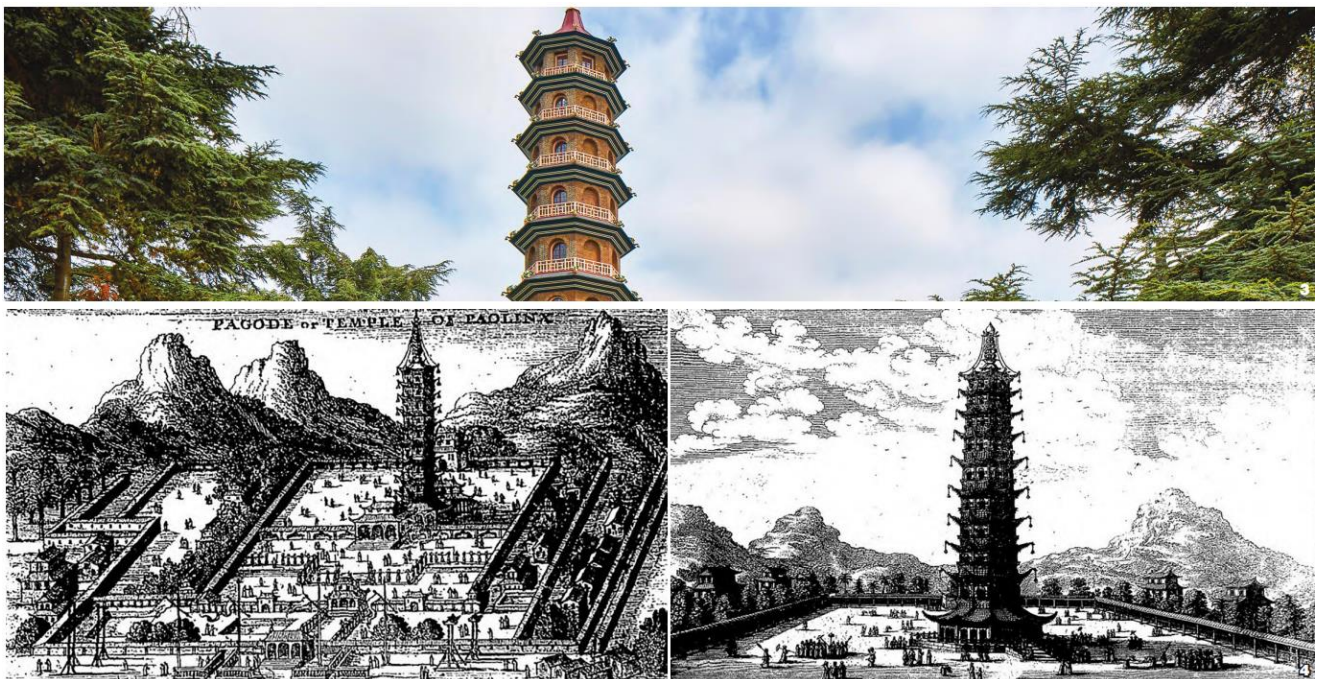


Figure 3: The Chinese Pagoda in Kew Gardens

### 3.2. The Influence of Chinese Shanshui Culture on modern China

In modern China, influenced by Western-dominated urban planning methods, urban and green space design often emphasizes spatial construction while neglecting the inheritance of traditional urban cultural heritage, resulting in a loss of landscape uniqueness. In fact, the unique *shanshui* endowment of each city is precisely the vital foundation for highlighting its distinctive landscape character. Although contemporary China is no longer an agricultural society, and the social background and economic conditions that gave rise to private gardens have undergone profound changes—such that the traditional techniques of simply piling rocks and managing water can no longer fully meet the scientific and aesthetic demands of modern gardens—the natural philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity" embedded in *shanshui* culture, as well as the wisdom of shaping urban mountain-and-water patterns, still deserve our in-depth exploration and reference.

For example, in 1992, Qian Xuesen proposed the concept of building a "*shanshui city*" with Chinese characteristics, intended as a reflection on the problems of rapid urban expansion and the severance of cultural continuity in China during the previous century. This concept sparked widespread public discussion upon its introduction. It integrates urban planning with garden planning, highlights cultural identity, and holds significant guiding value for contemporary urban development and the construction of urban greenways. Take the development of Hangzhou, a quintessential *shanshui* city, as an example. In ancient times, aside from its classic pattern of "lake and mountains on one side, city on the other," Hangzhou also expanded primarily along the Qiantang River. In the modern era, Hangzhou broke free from its former reliance on West Lake and developed a multi-cluster spatial pattern: Linping and Liangzhu to the north, Xiaoshan and Binjiang to the south, the Qiantang New Area to the east, and the Future Science and Technology City to the west. Throughout this process, however, Hangzhou has consistently respected the existing *shanshui* spatial framework, using mountain ranges and water bodies as natural boundaries to rationally delimit urban construction areas and effectively prevent uncontrolled urban sprawl. At the same time, the shaping of the city's skyline echoes the natural mountain ridgelines, achieving a harmonious coexistence between the artificial and the natural.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper systematically examines the origin and development of Chinese *shanshui* culture and its influence on gardens in China and the West. The study reveals that the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western gardens stems from distinct natural geography and philosophies: the West, shaped by open plains, developed formal gardens emphasizing human control over nature; while China, with its complex terrain, fostered a "harmony between heaven and humanity" worldview that seeks to "learn from nature." At the macro level, ancient Chinese cities integrated mountains and waters into urban layouts, creating patterns such as "mountain-city unity" and scenic sequences like the "Ten Views of West Lake." At the micro level, literati created private gardens using the principle of "a fist as a mountain, a spoon as a river," contrasting sharply with the axial symmetry of Western classical gardens. Spiritually, Chinese landscape poetry and painting employ "emotion through scenery" and "changing scenery with each step," differing from Western direct expression and focal perspective. In cross-cultural exchange, the Chinese ideal of "learning from nature" aligned with the British aesthetic reform in the 17th–18th centuries, sparking a European "gardening craze" and reshaping Western views on humanity's relationship with nature. Since the 20th century, it has become a key inspiration for international landscape design. Western scholarship, despite its religious perspective limitations, offers valuable scientific methods. For contemporary China, *shanshui* culture is crucial for addressing urban cultural fragmentation and landscape

homogeneity. Qian Xuesen's shanshui city" vision and Hangzhou's practices exemplify a path integrating tradition and modernity, contrasting with Western techno-rational urban expansion. Ultimately, Chinese shanshui culture serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, East and West, offering enduring insights for sustainable garden and urban development.

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