



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Auspicious Cultural Connotations of Flowers and Plants in Contemporary Chinese Gardens: Aesthetic Forms Expressed through Paintings

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**ABSTRACT**

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In contemporary Chinese gardens, flowers and plants play an important role in plant landscaping. The role of flowers and plants is not only reflected in beautifying and decorating the environment, but also has multiple cultural meanings. Auspicious culture is a traditional form of Chinese culture that also has widespread contemporary social significance. This research project adopts a studio practice approach, using a studio experimental and contextual approach to investigate how auspicious culture influences the types of flowers and plants grown in gardens. Bahar Behbahani, Wang Chaogang and Li Keran are the main artists in the scope of the research, and they express the cultural connotations of flowers and plants by representing the plants and flowers in the garden. The project establishes the intrinsic connection between folk culture and flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. It also creates a real garden space through the paintings, and by recomposing the forms of the compositions, it creates new visual spaces and provides a visual environment for the audience to experience the meaning of space and aesthetic forms.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Chinese folk customs, auspicious culture is a cultural form that has been passed down to the present day. Planting plants with auspicious cultural connotations in the garden is a beautiful blessing for life. Xu(2024) said that cultural landscapes are an indispensable element of humanity, nourishing the human soul.

Plants are not only carriers of emotions, but many plants are also blessed by people and have become symbols of good luck. As Tang (1995, p. 34) pointed that the role of plants in gardens is not just to provide shade and beautify the environment. Plants are not only carriers of emotions, but also symbols of culture and auspicious symbols. The cultural connotations of plants reflect the spiritual pursuits and value orientations that people hope to express through a particular plant (Le, 2019). Chen (2017) said that the so-called auspicious symbolism refers to the use of flowers as symbols of happiness, wealth, peace, health, and longevity. Auspicious symbolism refers to the use of flowers as folk symbols and popular symbols, such as happiness, wealth, peace, health, longevity, and many children, which is similar in spirit to the so-called “language of flowers” in the West.

As Ma (2010, p. 96) said that the Chinese have always had a psychological tendency to seek good fortune and avoid misfortune. Everyone wants to live a healthy, happy, and auspicious life.” This simple psychological need causes people to associate their living habits with the things they come into contact with in the outside world, combining the ecological habits of plants, such as their shapes and the characteristics of flowers and fruits, with traditional culture, forming various auspicious

symbols and traditional taboos about plants, which constitute a plant culture with national characteristics.

Folk auspicious cultural symbols are people's expectations and blessings for a happy life, and gardens can become places that carry these good wishes. Xiong (2013, p. 1850) said that the content symbol of "auspicious and good luck" is the main form of expression of Chinese traditional culture, which fully reflects the inner desires of the Chinese people. It is a kind of beautiful wish and blessing, looking forward to giving people hope and happiness. From the perspective of cultural psychology, the configuration of plants in gardens emphasizes good luck, and the combination of plants should imply good luck (Cao, 2005, p. 256). Therefore, auspicious culture is an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, and it is a benign external manifestation of the Chinese people's love for life and creation of happiness. It is natural for garden plants to carry auspicious culture. (Xu, 2009)

Times are progressing and the world is changing, but people's yearning for good fortune and beautiful things is eternal. People in any era have their own understanding and interpretation of their own real lives and things, as well as their own pursuit and yearning for a better future. People's psychology and emotions are influenced by the objective society and their experiences in life, and urban gardens provide a place for people to experience and perceive.

## **PROJECT OUTLINE**

This research project uses a studio practice approach to create paintings that examine the aesthetics of flowers and plants in the context of contemporary Chinese garden culture, with a focus on the cultural connotations of flowers and plants as symbols of good fortune. The main research objects are flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. Through the medium of oil painting, the constituent elements in the gardens are rearranged and arranged in a specific spatial environment. Through realistic techniques, the audience can experience the real scene of the garden, triggering cultural and aesthetic feelings. The project focuses on the aesthetic forms of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, as shown below:

- The main theoretical basis is the unity of man and nature, which embodies the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. The visual aesthetics is constructed through the study of contemporary Chinese gardens in the context of contemporary Chinese auspicious culture.
- The realistic painting expresses the construction of a real garden space, the composition highlights the characteristics of flowers and plants, and the auspicious cultural symbolism of the garden space is emphasized, so that the viewer feels a sense of cultural belonging and identity, and the contemporary characteristics of the Chinese garden are reflected.

## **RELEVANT THEORETICAL IDEAS**

The ideals and practices of Chinese landscape architecture have been profoundly influenced by ancient Chinese philosophies and cultural traditions (Chen 2008; Zhou and Chen 1992). The unifying theme of ancient Chinese philosophies and cultural traditions is unity of man with nature or harmony between man and nature. Cui (2015) said that the core of "Nature and Man in One" consists in the compatibility of man and environment. The construction of the garden shall be unified with the natural environment. And the construction arrangement, size, terrain and other aspects of the garden shall be adapted to the environment and flexible enough to enable the people to feel the harmony and the Chinese garden culture without any strange feelings about the artificial design. All of these represent the ideology of "Nature and Man in One". Influenced by Taoism, people are fond of natural things, and claim to recover themselves and cultivate their minds in the nature.

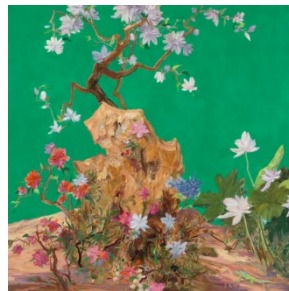
Zhang (2021) pointed that culture is a distinctive phenomenon of human society. The material and spiritual wealth created by human beings in the process of transforming the natural environment belongs to the category of culture; while nature refers to the material world outside human society. The traditional Chinese concept of 'the unity of heaven and humans' holds that people and nature are interconnected (Han, 2012; Zhang, 2020). Culture created by human beings is part of nature; and nature also belongs to cultures, whose attributes are defined by human beings and are part of peoples' lived experiences (Lin, 2002; Xu, 1996). From the perspective of critical heritage studies, culture and nature are mutually inclusive, mutually definable and difficult to separate. In different global cultures there are concepts similar to the Chinese concept of 'the unity of heaven and humans', where culture and nature are seen as an inseparable whole.

Zhou (2015, p.430) said that guided by this concept, Chinese gardens advocate the organic integration of architecture, landscape and plants, and focus on the beauty of the unity of man and nature. The mountains and waters, flowers and plants in Chinese gardens are organically integrated with the architecture. Pavilions and towers are placed next to the mountains and waters and in the shade of the flowers and plants. Scenic spots are interlaced and arranged in a herringbone flow, thus forming an artistic complex that is in harmony with the natural environment and the unity of man and nature.

LI (2006) pointed out that plants in the garden can be used as the main scenery to create a beautiful landscape, or as a supporting scenery to set off the buildings and rocks, thus giving the garden a sense of rhythm and seasonal changes. The landscape and artistic conception formed by the combination of mountains, rocks, water and plants is the manifestation of the gardener's artistic conception after condensing nature under the guidance of the philosophical thought of "unity of man and nature". In the eyes of the Chinese, garden plants are the embodiment of emotion and good fortune. Plants not only reflect aesthetic tastes, but also have unique character traits that can be used for "comparative thinking". They also have unique spatial characteristics that can blend in with the heavens and earth to achieve the effect of "unity of man and nature" and facilitate thinking about artistic conception.

### RELATED ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Wang chaogang(China)



**Figure 1: Golden Jade Full Hall, Oil on canvas, 120cmx120cm, 2022**

Golden Jade Full Hall is a common plant combination in traditional gardens, with 'golden' referring to the laurel, 'jade' to the magnolia; 'full' to the pomegranate; and 'hall' " refers to begonias. In ancient times, the Golden Jade Full Hall was planted in royal gardens as well as in the homes of commoners, signifying the fullness of the golden jade hall and the longevity of prosperity. This work uses fictional and abstract techniques to place auspicious flowers in a space, showing the spirit of traditional Chinese gardens and bringing the viewer closer to the garden through the plants.

As Wu(2023)said that Golden Jade Full Hall these simple four words convey people's most sincere hopes for life and show a positive and upward-looking attitude towards life. Therefore, a home filled with gold and jade is also a unique lucky culture in the national culture square,

BaharBehbahani (Iranian)



**Figure 2: Let the Garden Eram Flourish, from the Let the Garden Eram Flourish series.mixed media on canvas. 178 x 254 cm.2016**

The painting depicts a rectangular pool with water from cascading fountains, blending in with the trees on the horizon. The pool's rectilinear form contrasts with the flowing patterns in the image, which include plant silhouettes, topographical lines and Islamic architectural motifs (Rachel

Elizabeth Jones 2017). The red color visible in the painting represents blooming roses, a prominent and fixed element in gardens and Persian poetry. As Javadi (2020) said that roses play an important role in Iranian art, literature and culture and are one of the key symbols of Islamic Iranian motifs

Li keran(China)



**Figure 3: Man in a million plum blossoms, ink and wash on paper, 57.5cm x 45.5cm, 1961**

This painting, created by Li Keran in the early 1960s, shows his mature artistic style. He combines the red plum blossoms of the Plum Garden in Wuxi with those of the Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou, and uses dark ink and cinnabar to depict the branches and flowers, creating a red theme. The plum blossoms almost fill the screen, symbolising Chinese culture. Their image of blooming in the middle of winter heralds the arrival of spring. Li (2017) said that the plum blossom symbolises hardworking qualities as it blooms in the depths of winter, when most other flowers have already withered. Wong (2009) pointed out that the plum blossom is one of China's 'four gentlemanly flowers' and is used to symbolise high moral character.

### THE STUDIO INVESTIGATION

The research was carried out by investigating the cultural connotations of auspicious plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. It began with studio experiments, and the research was based on real-life photos of contemporary Chinese gardens. Sketch and oil painting materials were combined to reflect the visual space in the form of paintings.

For the frame of the work, a shaped frame was chosen to visually enhance the work. The shape of the frame is inspired by the design of windows in Chinese contemporary gardens. Unlike the practical function of Western windows, Chinese garden windows serve both decorative and aesthetic functions. They frame the scenery like picture frames. Empty windows are aesthetically pleasing and enhance the sense of space, and are used to separate and organise space. Wang (2021) pointed out the decorative and spatial functions of the empty windows. Hexagonal windows symbolise good fortune and are common in modern gardens. Fung (1996, p.92) said that windows often serve as a frame for the composition of the landscape. Modern materials and techniques have allowed traditional windows to be updated, such as wood-plastic and artificial stone, to preserve the cultural connotations. Figure 4 shows the hexagonal windows in Chongqing's Eling Park.



**Figure 4: Hexagonal window in Goose Ridge Park, Chongqing**



**The first panel: Peony**

The peony is a traditional Chinese flower that represents people's hope for good luck. Zhan (2019, p.705) said that the peony is a precious woody flower unique to China. It is graceful, dignified and elegant, fragrant and rich in aroma. It has long been known as the “national beauty” and “heavenly fragrance”, and is regarded by people as a symbol of wealth and good fortune. Ding (2020) said that there is a commonality behind the various interpretations of the peony. It reflects people's pursuit of beauty, happiness, openness, tolerance and prosperity.



**Figure 5: shows the Peony Pavilion and Peonies in Hangzhou Huagang Guanyu Public Park**

Figure 5 shows the Peony Pavilion and peonies in the Hangzhou Flower Harbor Fish Viewing Park. The flowerbed design in the park is not only conducive to the growth of peonies, but also symbolises good fortune and wealth. The harmonious layout of the Peony Pavilion and the plants embodies the Chinese garden concept of unity of man and nature. Stewart (1990, p162) emphasised the integration of architecture and landscape, while Chen (2011) mentioned that garden creators pay attention to maintaining the natural appearance and prune as much as possible to retain the natural form. The co-planting of peonies and pine trees not only symbolises good luck, but also provides shade and extends the viewing period, which is practical.



**Figure 6**

**Figure 7**

**Figure 8**

By combining realistic photos, a garden scene with foreground, middle ground and background is constructed. The sketch composition aims to fully display the design scene of the Peony Pavilion. Figures 6-8 show the various stages of sketch revision. Figure 8 adds peony details, emphasises the shape and details of the peonies in the foreground, and moves the pine trees from the background to the foreground. The background only shows the Peony Pavilion, making it the visual centre. The blank space in the picture enhances the ethereal and ‘virtual and real’ beauty, showing the artistic conception of plant landscaping and leaving room for imagination. This design emphasises the main subjects of flowers and plants, conveying the culture of good fortune. It is different from modern garden plant landscaping, which focuses on the effect of plant groups, and emphasises the group advantages of large-scale planting.

**The second panel: Wisteria**

Wisteria symbolises prosperity, wealth and good fortune. The vine clings to its support, symbolising a career that is going up. Its purple colour echoes the auspicious meaning of ‘purple vapours from the east’, and it is considered an auspicious flower in the garden. As Geng (2023, p.1108) said that in ancient China, purple represented good fortune and indicated that purple vapours from the east were a sign of good luck. The climbing nature of wisteria both protects the corridor and beautifies its design. Figure 9 shows the wisteria flowers and wisteria-covered corridor at the Flower Harbor Fish Viewing Park in Hangzhou. The wisteria-covered corridor is open on all sides, and the roof of the

corridor and the ground together form a visual frame, which also frames distant plants and water features into the corridor, creating a beautiful landscape picture of another space.

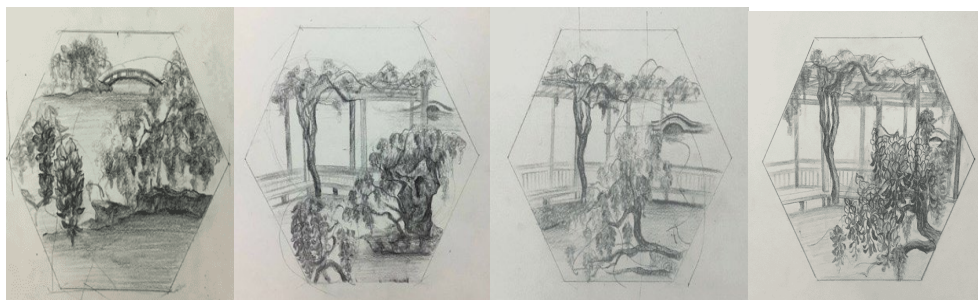


**Figure 9: Wisteria arbor and wisteria in Hangzhou Huangang Guanyu Park**



**Figure 10: View with bridge in Shenzhen People's Park**

Chinese garden bridges are practical and decorative, with a variety of styles that enhance visual beauty. Tay (2005) pointed out that bridges are often seen as a medium for connection, extension and contact, but from a metaphorical perspective, they are also a channel for invasion, conquest and change. Modern garden bridge designs combine modern aesthetics, as in the Shenzhen People's Park Bridge in Figure 10, which symbolises the connection between material and spiritual and provides new experiences.



**Figure 11**

**Figure 12**

**Figure 13**

**Figure 14**

Figures 11 to 14 show the gradual development of the sketch for the wisteria garden. The first composition in Figure 11 centres on the wisteria, with wisteria in the foreground on both sides echoing the bridge in the distance, emphasising the wisteria theme and exploring the practicality and beauty of the garden. The second composition in Figure 12 features a wisteria rockery instead of a real photo, reflecting the harmony between man and nature and emphasising the integration of practicality and beauty. However, adjustments are needed to highlight the details of the wisteria flowers. Figure 13 has been adjusted to remove the stone elements, with the complete wisteria tree in the foreground, focusing on the characteristics of the wisteria flowers. The perspective shifts from the foreground to the wisteria rockery in the middle ground, highlighting the visual effect. Figure 14 combines elements from previous issues to enrich the composition, removes the bridge in the foreground, and focuses mainly on the wisteria. The vertical composition highlights the foreground and middle ground, emphasises the detailed portrayal of the wisteria and the practical and aesthetic approach of the contemporary garden. The entire image uses the wisteria as the main landscaping element, which triggers thoughts about its cultural connotations.



**The third panel: Hydrangea**



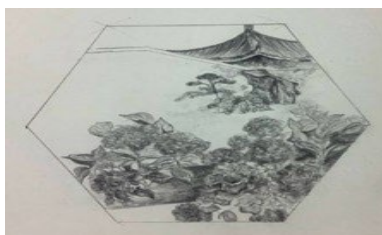
**Figure 15: The hydrangeas in Ningbo's Lvdao Park**

Figure 15 shows the hydrangeas in Ningbo's Lvdao Park blending in harmoniously with the architecture, Deng (2023) said that hydrangeas, as a common flower in contemporary gardens, not only attract attention with their bright colours and elegant posture, but also contain a wealth of cultural connotations, symbolising good fortune, happiness and reunion. with the white walls and sloping walls showing a combination of the ancient and the modern. The garden architecture coexists in harmony with nature, and the visual balance between the plants and the architecture echoes the concept of unity between man and nature. According to Yin (2005), garden architecture is like a landscape painting, with the architecture often hidden or visible in the mountains and forests, rising and falling, staggered and well-proportioned, blending in naturally with the flowers, trees and mountains. It creates a harmonious relationship between people and buildings, between buildings and nature, and between people and nature.



**Figure 16: Stone sculpture group in the Suzhou Museum Garden and Sculpture Park at the Guangzhou Garden Expo**

The Suzhou Museum garden in Figure 16 emphasises minimalist aesthetics, with innovative layouts of stone and water features, and rockeries that create the mood of a landscape painting. Xiao (2022) mentions the 'leaving blank' and emotional communication in oriental aesthetics to stimulate the viewer's imagination. Walls and blank spaces stimulate imagination in oriental aesthetics, dividing the space like a three-dimensional landscape painting. According to Keswick (2003, p. 106), the spatial units of the garden are divided by white walls that simulate mist, creating a three-dimensional stroll through a landscape painting. The rocks symbolise the power of nature, while the water features symbolise wealth and vitality. They are a reflection of the culture of good fortune. The Sculpture Park at the Guangzhou Garden Expo displays water hyacinths and rocks to convey cultural connotations.



**Figure: 17**



**Figure: 18**



**Figure: 19**

Figures 17 to 19 show the evolution of the garden composition sketch. Figure 19 is the final sketch, which incorporates changes from previous designs. The bridge is replaced with a combination of stones made from new materials, emphasising a new understanding of traditional culture. Natural stones are retained in the foreground to create a connection with the artificial stones in the middle ground, demonstrating the complementarity of nature and the artificial. The contrast between the stones and the plants enhances the visual appeal. The water features and plants create a subtle contrast through the reflection of the rocks and the image of the hydrangeas, which highlights the image of the hydrangeas. The interaction of contrasting elements creates a sense of harmony. This series of designs shows the integration and innovation of nature and artificiality, tradition and modernity in contemporary gardens.



**Figure 20: "Auspicious Garden" (2024) Oil on canvas, 80cm each diagonal**

Figure 20 is a triptych series that simulates viewing the scenery through a garden window. Zong (1981) said that windows play an important role in garden architecture. With windows, there is communication between the inside and outside. Looking at the scenery through the window lattice is like looking at a painting. Therefore, this set of works uses the shape of a hexagonal window as the shape of the frame. The peony, wisteria, and hydrangea with auspicious cultural connotations are chosen as the themes outside the window. The plants are highlighted through detailed treatment to increase visual diversity. The scene is set realistically, conveying the beauty of the garden through realistic techniques. Each scene has a visual centre, extending from the foreground plants to the buildings in the middle ground, shaping the garden space. O'Neill (2020, p. 80) mentioned that the characteristics of Chinese gardens, including the integration of historical architectural elements and open spaces, which meet people's behavioural needs and convey culture. The work conveys a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere, reflecting the auspicious culture under the thought of the unity of man and nature, shaping an image of a garden with cultural inclusiveness and a modern design feel.

## CONCLUSION

These works explore the influence of Chinese culture on contemporary garden flowers and plants, and through artistic works, they examine the impact of the theory of the unity of man and nature on contemporary landscape architecture. They evoke people's perception and understanding of the cultural connotations of contemporary Chinese garden flowers and plants. As Xu (2024) said that in the process of discovering and inheriting cultural landscapes, people have a deeper understanding and affection for their own culture and nation. In this process, the citizens' sense of pride and identity gradually increases, which in turn inspires their enthusiasm for inheriting and promoting their own culture, while creating a healthier living environment. As an artistic practice, the visual work of painting establishes a connection between the garden and the public. It explores the existential and aesthetic relationship between man and nature. The project visually elaborates on the auspicious cultural connotations of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, reflecting their aesthetic significance. Viewers form cultural and emotional interactions and resonances through the visual artworks.

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