

# Cultural Connotations of flowers and Plants in Contemporary Chinese Gardens: Interpreting Aesthetic Embodiment Through Painting

Jingjing Zhao <sup>1</sup>, Mohd Fauzi Sedon <sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Art, Sustainability & Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Art, Sustainability & Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia. Email: [mohd.fauzi@fskik.upsi.edu.my](mailto:mohd.fauzi@fskik.upsi.edu.my)

| ARTICLE INFO                                                           | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Received: 31 Dec 2024<br>Revised: 20 Feb 2025<br>Accepted: 28 Feb 2025 | <p>In contemporary Chinese garden spaces, flowers and plants play an important role in plant landscaping, they play an important role in the beautification of the environment on the one hand, and on the other hand, flowers and plants are also endowed with important cultural meanings, and the culture of gentleman and multiculturalism have become the main influences on the cultural connotations of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. This research project adopts a hands-on studio approach to investigate how contemporary Chinese culture influences the types of flowers and plants in gardens through studio experiments and contextual approaches. Zhou Chunya, Bahar Behbahani, and Wu Guanzhong are the major artists within the study. They embodied their cultural allegories through the flowers and plants in their gardens. The project establishes the cultural connotations and the intrinsic relationship between flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, it also creates real garden spaces through paintings that evoke the impression of contemporary Chinese gardens, which are characterised by the combination of other constituent elements in the garden. By reassembling the composition, it creates a new visual space for the paintings and stimulates the viewer's aesthetic perception of the flowers and plants in Chinese gardens.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Chinese contemporary gardens, flowers, plants, cultural connotations, visual art works.</p> |

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Chinese society is affected by urbanisation and the construction of urban gardens is conducive to the promotion of a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, whilst the philosophy of respect for the natural world can be embodied, developed and promoted in the gardens. Olivadese (2022) said that among green areas, parks and gardens at the heart of large cities provide a link to the natural world. Gardens are also considered a symbolic place. Bhatti (2002) said that gardens convey important ideas about our relationships to our culture. Garden building is a creative process based on the high degree of extraction and artistic generalisation of nature (Liu, 2012).

The plants of a Chinese garden play not only their obvious role as constituent elements, but also, through their traditional symbolic and historical associations, set mood, theme and character of each section of the garden to heighten the poetic and aesthetic quality of the garden scene (Engel, 1986, p.45). Plant temperament refers to the fact that people experience a certain personality beauty in the process of appreciating plants, thus giving them certain qualifications and qualities. The temperament of flowers and trees symbolises human character and becomes a humanistic carrier to express philosophy. The appreciation of plant character in traditional Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucianism, especially the "gentleman is more virtuous than a man", which has a strong influence on the design of garden plant landscapes and advocates the experience of natural beauty from the perspective of ethics and morality. As Maggie (2003, p. 169) said that the choice of plants does not only depend on the planting location and appearance, as plants are also symbols of values and ideals.

Contemporary is a diversified society, contemporary culture is also influenced by other cultures, the western naturalistic garden design mode pursues the harmony between human and self-heating, which is extremely similar to the Chinese philosophical thought of unity of man and heaven, so there are flowers and plants in contemporary gardens that are a fusion of Chinese and western cultural connotations. Plants have become an important element in park landscaping, and Wang (1995) argues that landscapes must have a functional value that satisfies people's material and spiritual needs. As Poursafa (2016, p. 526) described that through proper utilisation, plants can transform a place into a highly functional site with strong recognisable and aesthetic value. The plantscapes in contemporary Chinese gardens form areas that represent cultural connotations and allow people to find a sense of cultural belonging.

### PROJECT OUTLINE

This research project investigates the aesthetics of flowers and plants in the cultural context of contemporary Chinese gardens through a studio practice approach to creating paintings. With flowers and plants in contemporary gardens as the main object of investigation, the images used are from contemporary Chinese gardens. Through the medium of oil paintings, visual elements in the gardens are reassembled and composed, and these visual elements are designed to be arranged in specific spatial environments, so as to allow the viewer to experience the real garden scene through a realistic approach. Awakening cultural and aesthetic awareness. The project focuses on the aesthetic forms of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, as expressed below:

- Taking the unity of heaven and man as the main theoretical basis, embodying the harmony between man and nature, and working with contemporary Chinese gardens as the object of research in the context of contemporary Chinese culture, it constructs visual aesthetics.
- Constructing the garden space through realistic painting expression, highlighting the characteristics of flowers and plants, creating cultural symbols of the garden space with reconstructed images, generating a sense of cultural belonging and identity. Embodying the contemporary characteristics of Chinese gardens.

### RELEVANT THEORETICAL IDEAS

The philosophy and practice of Chinese garden architecture is heavily influenced by ancient Chinese philosophy and cultural traditions, the unifying theme of which is the unity of heaven and man.

Zhang (2021) pointed out 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 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). 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, 2012). From the perspective of critical heritage studies, culture and nature are mutually inclusive, mutually definable and difficult to separate. different global cultures there are concepts similar to the Chinese concept of 'the unity of heaven and humans', where 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

Chen (2009, p.1017) stated that in today's terminology, "unity of man and nature" means that human activities, including their architectural creations, should be integrated within natural patterns and processes so that harmony between man and nature can be achieved. In the context of landscape design, this does not imply a "return to nature" or a "return to a primitive way of life"; on the contrary, it supports the dialectical design principle of "originating from nature but transcending it". In other words, landscape design and planning should follow and utilise the natural rhythms and ecological principles of a particular site. At the same time, nature must be adapted and artificial elements incorporated to meet the social, economic and cultural needs of the humans who inhabit the landscape.

LI (2006) pointed out that plants in the garden can be used as the main scenery to form a beautiful landscape, and can also be used as a supporting scenery to set off the architectural rocks and stones, thus giving the garden with the rhythm of life and seasonal changes, and mountains, rocks, water and plants with the formation of the garden and the mood, is the gardeners in the "unity of man and nature" philosophical thinking under the guidance of the natural

condensed in its artistic conception of the manifestation. Concentrated in its artistic conception of the manifestation. In the eyes of the Chinese, garden plants are the embodiment of feelings and good luck. Plants not only reflect the aesthetic interest, but also rich in character traits, which can be used for "Bide", but also have unique spatial characteristics, which can be blended with heaven and earth to achieve the effect of "unity of man and nature", which is conducive to the thinking of the mood.

### RELATED ARTISTIC PRACTICES

#### Zhou Chunya



**Figure 1** Spring Colours of Lean West Lake, oil on canvas, 250x200cm, 2015

The artist's depiction of Lean West Lake, a lakeside garden complex in Yangzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China, Spring at Lean West Lake was painted in the spring when the fireworks were in full bloom and the flowers were blossoming. The light grey texture of the Taihu Lake stones in the lower right of the picture contrasts with the spring scene. The lake is depicted with overlapping brushstrokes to create a flowing blur, highlighting the image of peach blossoms in the garden, a classic symbol in Zhou Chunya's paintings. Peach blossoms and stones are common compositional elements in Chinese gardens. It dissolves the boundaries of time, space and culture. WU (2022, p.81) said that they are not only depictions of garden landscapes, but also unique interpretations of Chinese garden culture, reflecting a cultural identity that incorporates contemporary perspectives and individual positions.

#### Bahar Behbahani



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

In the painting, a rectangular pool is fed by a tiered fountain, which recedes into a tree-dotted horizon. The jutting straight lines of the pool contrast strongly with the fluid layers of patterns and texture that cover the entire picture plane. Mark making abounds: botanical outlines and formations, lines that suggest topography and thumbprints, the tessellated diamond patterns of Islamic architecture (Rachel, 2017). She used blue in his paintings to reflect its role as the dominant colour in different eras of Iranian history and art, and to represent the ubiquitous tile structures in Persian architecture. Blue also symbolises the abundance of water in the fountains and pools of Persian gardens. The red colour visible in many paintings represents the blooming rose, a prominent fixture in gardens and Persian poetry. Shahidi (2010) said that in Iranian gardens, each plant has its own special symbols and signs

## Wu Guanzhong

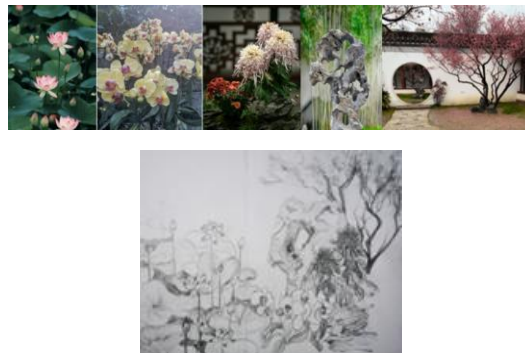


**Figure 3.** Plum Garden, Wuxi, 66.8 x 70.5 cm on colour paper, 1979

Wu Guanzhong used a bold aerial perspective in order to capture the plum blossoms in a garden full of them. Chinese paintings often lack a background, and the plum blossoms under a white background accentuates their beauty. This painting perfectly captures Wu Guanzhong's emotion. The rockery and pavilion leap out of the picture space, joining the 10,000 boats on the Taihu Lake and reflecting the plum blossoms, breaking the monotony of the space. Wu (2000, p.63) said that plum is one of the indispensable symbols of Chinese culture, and the most popular subjects in painting, the plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, are known as the Four Gentlemen because they all symbolise the noble moral qualities of Chinese tradition, with the plum being at the top of the list of the plums, which is the plum of honour.

### THE STUDIO INVESTIGATION

The studio research study was conducted to investigate the cultural connotations as well as the aesthetic characteristics of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. The experimentation began in the studio with an initial plan to develop ideas of composition through images of contemporary Chinese gardens, and the project began with a focus on highlighting elements of juniper culture and multicultural influences in order to realise the connection between garden flowers and plants and contemporary people.



**Figure 4.** Primary stage of sketching

The first work focuses on highlighting the cultural connotation of flowers and plants in contemporary gardens and the virtue of the plant gentleman. Therefore, this stage is mainly from the contemporary garden to look for plants with the cultural connotation of gentleman combined with other gardening elements of contemporary gardens, to carry out picture research and analysis, the picture above is the primary stage of the composition of the work, the plants chosen are plum blossoms, orchids, chrysanthemums, and lotus flowers. Goven(2023) said that The Four Gentlemen is one of the traditional Chinese cultures. traditional Chinese cultures. It refers to plum blossoms, orchids, chrysanthemums, and bamboo. It symbolises personality and character, represents It symbolises personality and character, represents integrity, modesty, purity, and integrity. Therefore they are called “Four Gentlemen in Flowers” or “Four Gentlemen”. As long (2015, p. 214) said that in Chinese culture, the lotus flower symbolises the ultimate purity and perfection of the human heart and mind, as it rises from murky water (meaning a polluted environment), emerges from the silt and mud, and washes away the evils of the sea. Also in the content of the picture choose to represent the natural elements of the Taihu Lake stone.



**Figure 5.** Advanced stages of sketching

Figure 5 shows the advanced stage of the sketch, which uses foreground, mid-range and distant views to first build a realistic garden scene through sketching. Plants representing the beauty of the gentleman are placed in the foreground, mid-range and far-range of the picture. Pine and bamboo are added to the choice of plants in the primary sketch, and in addition to the plant elements, the enclosing wall, the moon gate, and the leisure chairs, all of which are common in contemporary Chinese gardens, are also added. The addition of leisure chairs enhances the emphasis on humanistic feelings in contemporary gardens, providing a space where cultural connotations can be felt and focusing on the interactive perception of man and nature's flowers and plants. Through this compositional arrangement, the viewer is placed in a seemingly enclosed spatial scene in which the flowers and plants represent the beauty of the gentleman and embody a serene garden environment.



**Figure 6.** The Garden of Gentlemen (2023) Oil on canvas, 130x70cm

The final work figure 6 consists of images taken from actual contemporary Chinese gardens. The work's foreground, middle and distance views collect all the flowers and plants that represent the character, and the distribution of the plants is grouped in order to highlight the characteristics of each type of flower and plant. Orchids, lotus and chrysanthemums are placed in the front of the work because flowering plants produce a good visual sensory effect and their bright hues trigger a visual response in the viewer. Plum blossoms and stones, a combination of elements representing the qualities of a tough gentleman, serve as a link with the pine tree in the centre. The main purpose is to combine these plants, which represent the temperament of a gentleman and the beauty of character, to form a cultural garden with character virtues. As Dong (2009, p. 890) said that the garden landscape. Cultural connotations prompt humans to live in harmony with nature. With bamboo as the background, it seems to form a closed and quiet space. The rendering of this atmosphere is extremely similar to that of a gentleman's emptiness, allowing people to experience the spiritual pursuit that flowers and plants bring to people in this space. The spatial shaping of the gentleman's garden provides a picture place of quiet leisure, as depicted by O'Neill (2022, p. 82), where the dominant colour of green contributes to the unity of the spatial tone and creates a quiet gentleman's garden environment. Wang



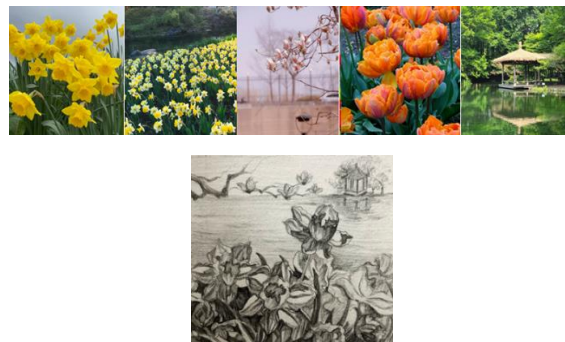
(1981) said that emotion and landscape are inseparable. Meaning that the garden landscape fits the viewer's inner emotional world.

The purpose of the second piece is to highlight the beautiful symbolism and cultural connotations of love in contemporary Chinese garden flora. The work is a series, presented as a combination of three pieces. Contemporary is a diversified society and contemporary culture is also influenced by other cultures. The cultural connotations of flowers and plants in Chinese contemporary gardens are influenced by Western floral language, and as Yeh (2004, p. 279) said that European and American floral language is also colourful and unique. Europeans and Americans have given allegories to hundreds of flowers and trees respectively to express rich connotations. Therefore, in contemporary gardens there are also flowers and plants with a blend of Chinese and Western cultural connotations.



**Figure 7.** Combined composition of tulips and cherry blossoms

The plants chosen for the first panel of sketches are tulips and cherry blossoms. Kate (2023) said that Tulips symbolise fame and the perfect lover and can be used as a declaration of true love. The tulips and cherry blossoms make up the foreground and foreground respectively, with the lawn appearing in the centre to represent a connection and integration, and the tulips in the foreground have been chosen to be mainly red and white, highlighting the cultural symbolism of love, and conveying the spirit of the piece in a visual that is stable and extends into the distance.



**Figure 8.** Combined composition of daffodils and magnolias

The plants chosen for the second panel are daffodils and magnolias that make up the foreground. As stated by Hou (2019) the magnolia represents faithful love. Combined with the pavilion designed with thatched natural elements in the garden, it is a naturalistic design garden element that conveys the spirit of the work with a visual effect that extends into the distance. The naturalistic mode of garden design pursues the harmony between man and self-heating, which is very similar to the Chinese philosophy of the unity of heaven and man



**Figure 9.** Composition of a rose combination

Some of the key elements in the third panel work, such as the roses, which represent the cultural connotation of love, are arranged in the foreground of the work, and the addition of the pavilion adds to the character of the design elements in contemporary Chinese gardens, reflecting the fit between practicality and aesthetics. The flowers and the architecture are integrated, reflecting the view of the unity of heaven and man.



**Figure 10.** Garden of Love (2023) Oil on canvas, 60cm per panel

Figure 10 shows the final paintings, which are taken from actual locations in contemporary Chinese gardens. The presence of tulips, daffodils, magnolias, cherry blossoms and roses in the paintings evokes cultural symbols of love, and the flowers and plants in these paintings range from those that are indigenous to China and represent the cultural connotations of love, such as magnolias, to those that have been influenced by the language of Western floristry and that also culturally symbolise love (daffodils, tulips, roses). In fact these flowering plants are very popular. They are easily found in contemporary Chinese gardens. As Tang (1995, p. 34) pointed out that the role of plants in the garden is more than just shade and landscaping. Plants are not only carriers of emotions, but also cultural symbols and signs of good fortune. The three combined paintings evoke feelings of warmth, hospitality and love through the intricate variety of flowers and warm colours. The main compositional approach is all about highlighting the plants in the foreground and showing the vitality of the flowers through the natural and varied shapes of the foreground flowers. Chinese gardens are a product of the combination of culture and nature. The combination of these flowers and plants representing the cultural connotations of love in the picture creates a strong visual feeling, and the foreground extends to the distant view, forming three gardens full of love.

## CONCLUSION

These works explore the influence of culture on the flowers and plants of contemporary Chinese gardens, creating visual effects through painting that evoke perception and appreciation of the cultural connotations of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens. It serves as an artistic practice that investigates the influence of the theory of the unity of heaven and man on contemporary gardening. The work also establishes a link between gardens and the general public. The planting of such flowers and plants in contemporary urban gardens is no longer merely a representation of personal ideals; it embodies a common ideology, a shared standard of character and virtue among contemporary Chinese. It explores the existential and aesthetic relationship between man and nature. The project visually articulates the aesthetic significance of flowers and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, reflecting cultural identity. By viewing and appreciating the flowers and plants in the garden, it enables contemporary people to develop cultural empathy and emotional interaction.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Barrico, L., Castro, H., Coutinho, A. P., Gonçalves, M. T., Freitas, H., & Castro, P. (2018). Plant and microbial biodiversity in urban forests and public gardens: Insights for cities' sustainable development. *Urban forestry & urban greening*, 29, 19-27.
- [2] Bhatti, M. (2002). The meaning of gardens in an age of risk. In *Ideal Homes?* (pp. 186-198). Routledge.
- [3] Chen, X., & Wu, J. (2009). Sustainable landscape architecture: implications of the Chinese philosophy of "unity of man with nature" and beyond. *Landscape ecology*, 24, 1015-1026.
- [4] Dong, L. (2009, June). Plants and their cultural meaning in Chinese historical gardens. In *II International Conference on Landscape and Urban Horticulture* 881 (pp. 885-889).
- [5] Engel, D. H. (1986). *Creating a Chinese garden*. London: Croom Helm.
- [6] FU, J. J., & TANG, X. X. (2019). Naturalistic, Harmonious, and Emotional: An Aesthetic Study of Plants of Chinese Gardens in the Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 9(12), 1326-1332.
- [7] Goven, R. M. (2023). ANALYSIS OF JAKARTA CHINESE UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE CHINA "FOUR GENTLEMEN". *Jurnal Bahasa dan Budaya China*, 10(2).
- [8] Han, F. (2012). Cultural landscape: A Chinese way of seeing nature. In K. Taylor & J. Lennon (Eds.), *Managing cultural landscapes* (pp. 90-108). Routledge.
- [9] Hou, Z.Z & Xu, L (2019). An Analysis of the Cultural Application of Magnolia. *Modern Agriculture*
- [10] Katemcgregor (2023) <https://www.housebeautiful.com/lifestyle/gardening/g45571819/flower-meanings-symbolism-guide/>

- 
- [11] Li, B.Y& Zhang, Q.X. (2006). Embodiment of the Philosophy of "The Unity of Heaven and Man" in Chinese Gardens. *Journal of Beijing Forestry University (Social Science Edition)* (01), 16-19.)
  - [12] Liu, T., & Qiu, M. (2012). *Classical gardens in China*. New York: Better Link Press.
  - [13] Long C, Ni Y, Zhang X, et al. Biodiversity of Chinese ornamentals[J]. *Acta Horti*, 2015, 1087: 209-220.
  - [14] Maggie Keswick, *The Chinese Garden* (2003), pp. 169 and 192
  - [15] O'Neill P. Connecting generations in Chinese urban parks[M]//*Intergenerational Contact Zones*. Routledge, 2020: 77-85.
  - [16] Olivadese, M., & Dindo, M. L. (2022). Historic and contemporary gardens: a humanistic approach to evaluate their role in enhancing cultural, natural and social heritage. *Land*, 11(12), 2214.
  - [17] Poursafar, Z. (2016). The functions of plants in Asian gardens: A review on Asian landscape architecture. *International Journal of Applied Environmental Sciences*, 11(2), 525-533.
  - [18] Rachel Elizabeth Jones
  - [19] <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/arts-culture/art-review-bahar-behbahani-hood-downtown>
  - [20] SHahidi, M., Bemanian, M. R., Almasifar, N., & Okhovat, H. (2010). A study on cultural and environmental basics at formal elements of Persian gardens (before & after Islam). *Asian Culture and History*, 2(2), 133.
  - [21] Tang Guohua. The design characteristics of the thermal environment of Dongguan "Ke Yuan" Guangdong Garden, 1995, (4):33-37.
  - [22] Tu, W. M. (2001). The ecological turn in new Confucian humanism: Implications for China and the world. *Daedalus*, 130(4), 243-264.
  - [23] Wang, A. (1995). *System thinking and Modern design*. Beijing: China Architecture & Building
  - [24] Wang, F. Z. (1981). *Notes on poetry of Jiang Zhai*. Beijing: People's Literature Press
  - [25] Wu, G. (2008). *Wu Dangfeng*, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House
  - [26] Wu, Y.Q. (2022). The Cultural Identity of "Searching for Me with Me"-On Zhou Chunya's Painting. *Art Review*
  - [27] Xu, F. (1996). *Elaboration and promotion of traditional Chinese humanity*. Broadcasting and TV Publishing.
  - [28] Ye.W. G (2004). Flowers and Chinese and Western Cultures. *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University*, 275-281.
  - [29] Zhang, R. (2020). *Chinese heritage sites and their audiences: The power of the past*. Routledge.
  - [30] Zhang, R., Wang, J., & Brown, S. (2021). 'The Charm of a Thousand Years': exploring tourists' perspectives of the 'culture-nature value' of the Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou, China. *Landscape Research*, 46(8), 1071-1088.