



# Similarities and Differences Between Chinese and Korean Classical Gardens from a Cultural Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese and Korean classical garden spaces exhibit significant similarities and differences from a cultural perspective. Chinese classical gardens aspire to an ideal state of natural landscapes, incorporating profound Feng Shui theories into their design. Korean classical gardens emphasize the concept of "nature and ecology," focusing on functionality and practicality while utilizing the local geographical environment for landscape creation. The garden design philosophies of both countries share common ground, such as the pursuit of a harmonious state with nature, and there are also similarities in the architectural elements of classical gardens. However, in the humanistic ideas reflected in royal gardens, there are notable differences between China and Korea: Chinese gardens are more reflective of Confucian ideals of moderation and ritual order, while Korean gardens, influenced by a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, emphasize harmony between nature and humanity. Comparing the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean classical gardens offers a deeper understanding of the cultural connotations and heritage connections in garden design in both countries.

**Keywords:** Cultural Perspective; Chinese and Korean Classical Gardens; Similarities and Differences

Classical gardens, as an essential part of the traditional cultures of China and Korea, reflect the unique aesthetic concepts and cultural values of each country. Chinese classical gardens, with a long-standing history, are renowned for their philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity" and their profound Feng Shui theories, emphasizing the ideal state of natural landscapes and the symbolic meaning of garden spaces. Korean classical gardens, influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, focus on the combination of natural ecology and practical functionality, embodying a harmonious coexistence with the environment. In recent years, with globalization and the deepening of cultural exchanges, the garden design concepts and practices of China and Korea have gained increasing attention. Examining the similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean classical garden spaces helps to reveal the commonalities and distinctions of garden art in the context of nature and humanity, providing a deeper understanding of their cultural connotations and their influence on modern garden design <sup>[1]</sup>.

## I KOREAN CLASSICAL GARDEN INFLUENCED BY CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE

### (1) The embodiment of Confucianism

From a cultural perspective, the design of Korean classical gardens was deeply influenced by Confucian thought. The Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) marked the peak of Confucianism on the Korean Peninsula, and during this period, garden design and layout not only reflected Confucian ethical principles but also demonstrated their practical application. Firstly, Confucian thought profoundly influenced the construction of local schools and academies during the Joseon period. These educational institutions featured unique spatial layouts closely related to garden design, reflecting the emphasis on moral education and hierarchical order advocated by Confucianism. In these educational settings, garden spaces were meticulously designed to provide an environment for teaching and self-cultivation in line with Confucian doctrines. The garden designs of these academies typically included serene courtyards, winding paths, delicate stone bridges, and decorations reflecting Confucian thought, creating a

solemn atmosphere rich in cultural heritage.

In the layout of palatial and private gardens, Confucian thought also played a crucial guiding role. The Confucian emphasis on gender separation and social hierarchy was evident in garden design. In private gardens, this was manifested through a strict division of space. Most private gardens were located at the base of a hillside, with the hillside segmented into several tiers, and residential buildings arranged accordingly. This design not only considered living comfort but also respected the Confucian requirements for spatial hierarchy. In such layouts, the backyard often connected with the hillside, creating a harmonious blend of nature and humanity, with elements like flower terraces used to connect the slope with the courtyard, reflecting the concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity." Additionally, under the influence of Confucianism, ancestral shrines, which housed ancestral tablets, were usually placed at the highest point in the courtyard. This design not only demonstrated respect for ancestors but also aligned with Confucian ideals of family harmony and reverence for elders. The placement of the shrine held significant symbolic meaning in garden design, highlighting the importance of family tradition and Confucian ethics.

The influence of Confucian thought on gender differentiation was also evident in the strict spatial divisions within garden design. There were clear boundaries between the main house and other buildings, with the main house having relatively greater privacy to reflect traditional notions of gender separation. For example, Seonbichon in Gangneung, South Korea, is a typical example. The garden design of Seonbichon features a distinct separation between the main house and auxiliary buildings, fully demonstrating the spatial layout norms under Confucian influence. The manifestation of Confucian thought in Korean classical garden design is not only an influence on spatial layout but also a profound reflection of traditional culture and ethical values.

## **(2) The embodiment of celestial thought**

In Korean classical garden design, the concept of immortality is reflected through various forms, such as scenic spot names, layout designs, and decorative patterns, each carrying profound cultural connotations. Firstly, the idea of immortality is directly manifested in the names of garden spots. For example, in Gwanghallu Garden, Yongju Island and Bangjang Island are named "Yongjuru Pavilion" and "Bangjangjeong Pavilion," respectively. These names not only highlight the uniqueness of the garden spots but also convey important concepts of immortality. In ancient Chinese mythology, Yongju, Bangjang, and Penglai are three sacred mountains, known as "immortal islands," representing ideals of eternal life and transcendence. These names have been inherited and carried forward in Korean gardens, reflecting a reverence and aspiration for the concept of immortality [3].

Secondly, the "one pond and three mountains" layout design is another manifestation of the idea of immortality in gardens. In the Gwanghallu Garden pond, three islands—Bangjang Island, Yongju Island, and Penglai Island—represent the three sacred mountains from Chinese mythology. This layout not only serves a decorative purpose but also reflects the desire to achieve an ideal state as expressed in the concept of immortality. The three islands, distributed throughout the pond, resemble three immortal islands, adding a mysterious and distant atmosphere to the entire garden. Through this layout, garden designers convey a longing for the immortal world and a pursuit of an ideal state on earth.

Additionally, the concept of immortality is reflected in the decorative patterns on walls and chimneys. In Korean classical gardens, decorative patterns with immortal imagery, such as the "Ten Symbols of Longevity," are commonly seen. A representative example is the walls and chimneys with the "Ten Symbols of Longevity" in Gyeongbokgung Palace's Jagyeongjeon Hall. The "Ten Symbols of Longevity" patterns are not merely decorations but also symbols of immortality, expressing a pursuit of longevity and eternal life. These patterns are crafted with exquisite artistry, making the garden space both visually appealing and culturally profound.

The expression of the concept of immortality in Korean classical gardens is diverse and profound. From scenic spot names to layout designs and decorative patterns, each form embodies a longing for the immortal world and the pursuit of ideals of eternal life. These designs not only enrich the cultural connotations of the gardens but also allow people to experience a profound spiritual world while appreciating the beauty of the scenery.

## **II SIMILARITY OF CHINESE AND KOREAN CLASSICAL GARDEN DESIGN**

### **(1) Similarity of ideas**

The similarity of Chinese and Korean classical garden design in concept stems from the profound historical and cultural exchanges between the two countries. This similarity can be traced back to ancient times, especially during the Tang and Song dynasties when cultural exchanges were particularly frequent, and the influence of this period is clearly reflected in Korean garden design. Cultural exchange between China and Korea began during the Han Dynasty, but reached its peak during the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties. The Tang Dynasty was a period of cultural prosperity in Chinese history, and the garden design concepts and styles of this period were widely absorbed and integrated into Korean garden design. For example, the common layout forms and scenic spots in Korean garden design can be traced back to the influence of Chinese Tang Dynasty gardens. Tang Dynasty gardens pay attention to the integration of natural landscape, emphasizing the harmony of landscape, flowers and trees and architecture, and this concept has been well inherited in Korean garden design. During Japan's rule of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, traditional Chinese culture continued to have a profound influence on Korean garden design, despite the influence of Japanese cultural policies. Especially during this period, Korea was significantly influenced by Chinese culture in terms of language, culture, values and architectural style. This historical background not only strengthens the similarity of garden design concepts between China and South Korea, but also lays the foundation for the continuation of the tradition of Korean garden design. For example, the Gyeongbokgung Palace in South Korea reflects the influence of Chinese gardens in its design. The word "Jingfu" of Gyeongbokgung Palace is derived from a famous sentence in the Book of Songs: "If you are drunk with wine, you are satisfied with morality, and a gentleman will spend thousands of years at Jingfu." The use of this traditional

term not only reflects the influence of ancient Chinese garden culture on South Korea, but also demonstrates the profound connection between the garden design concepts of the two countries <sup>[4]</sup>. In addition, the Joseon dynasty emperor Lee Sung-Gye modeled the architecture of the Forbidden City in China when he built the Gyeongbokgung Palace in an effort to present an opulent design. This imitation is not only reflected in the scale and form of the building, but also reflects the respect and inheritance of the Chinese garden design concept. The Chinese Village in Freedom Park in Incheon, South Korea, is also an example of the similarity of Chinese and Korean garden design concepts. Although the park is primarily designed to showcase Chinese cultural traditions, its design concepts and elements are undoubtedly influenced by ancient Chinese garden design. The design of Freedom Park retains many features of traditional Chinese gardens, such as the layout of mountains, flowers and trees, etc., reflecting the cross-cultural inheritance of classical garden design concepts. The similarity of Chinese and Korean classical garden design in concept reflects the profound influence of the historical and cultural exchanges between the two countries. The garden design concepts of Tang and Song dynasties in China have been widely absorbed and practiced in South Korea, and this cross-cultural influence makes the classical gardens of the two countries show amazing similarities in design concepts.

## **(2) The pursuit of natural mountains and rivers**

Visiting the gardens of China and South Korea, we can clearly feel that the two countries pursue a similar realm in the landscape design of natural mountains and rivers. The natural environment in the gardens of the two countries, most of which are typical symbols of mountains and rivers, shows the process from the initial fear of nature to the gradual development of the recognition, understanding, worship and utilization of nature. In this process, garden designers' deep understanding and artistic expression of natural landscapes are reflected in borrowing scenery, adding natural scenery or creating artificial scenery <sup>[5]</sup>. The design concept of Chinese classical garden pays attention to integrating natural landscape into garden space, and displays the cultural connotation and artistic pursuit of the garden owner through landscape scenery. The Summer Palace, the Humble Administrator's Garden and other gardens are classic representatives of the layout based on natural landscapes. The landscape of Kunming Lake and Wanshou Mountain in the Summer Palace, as well as the pond and rockery in the Humble Administrator's Garden, all combine natural elements with artificial structures, showing a harmonious realm of "harmony between heaven and man". This design not only focuses on the beauty of the landscape, but also emphasizes the interaction and integration of human and nature. This design concept is also reflected in Korean gardens. For example, two gardens, Gyeongbokgung Palace and Yan-a-chi, also show obvious similarities in the overall layout of natural landscapes. The layout of lakes and hills in the back garden of Gyeongbokgung Palace and the Yanya Pool, often with natural landscapes as the background, shows the aesthetic and cultural pursuit of garden designers through careful arrangement and decoration. It is particularly noteworthy that there are obvious similarities between scenic spots such as "Pengdao Yaotai", "Lianxi Yueju", and "Sitting on the Rock near the Stream" in the Chinese Old Summer Palace and the Ailian Pavilion in the Gyeongdeok Palace in South Korea. These scenic spots embody the combination of poetry and nature in landscape design and spatial layout <sup>[6]</sup>. The "Pengdao Yao Terrace" in Yuanmingyuan is a beautiful place with its islands in the lake and the surrounding landscape, while the design of the lotus Pavilion shows the elegance and tranquility of nature through the combination of pavilion and lotus pool. Another example is the "Yeon Nam Xun" pavilion in Beihai Park in Beijing and the "Seokang Pavilion" in Changdeok Palace in South Korea, although they have different names, their design concepts are very similar. Both of them are surrounded by natural mountains and rivers, integrating the structure of pavilions, making the garden architecture not only harmoniously integrated with the natural environment, but also has practical functions. The natural landscape elements in Chinese and Korean garden design show the common points of garden culture of the two countries. Whether it is the Summer Palace and Yuanmingyuan in China, or the Gyeongbokgung Palace and Yanya Pond in South Korea, they all embody the concept of "harmony between heaven and man", taking natural mountains and rivers as the main component elements, and creating a garden landscape that integrates harmoniously with the natural environment through clever layout and design.

## **(3) The similarity of classical garden architecture**

In Korean classical garden architecture, we can clearly see the similar design characteristics of Chinese classical garden architecture. This similarity is reflected in garden layout, architectural style and architectural structure. For example, the design of "three islands in a pool" next to the Gyeongbok Palace in South Korea has obvious similarities with the traditional technique of "three mountains in one pool" in Chinese gardens. A similar "three islands" design can also be found in the Yanap Pond in southeast Cheongju, South Korea, which clearly inherits the concept of classical Chinese gardens, and reflects the harmonious combination of nature and architecture through the arrangement of islands on the water. Korean classical garden architecture is usually based on wooden frames, supplemented by masonry laying. These buildings are elegant and distinctive in appearance. The roof design is smooth and smooth, the house is usually low, and the ridge ends and the eaves end are raised and curved. The eaves of the roof are longer, and most of them are sheshan style, laid with black cylinder tiles, and the overall color is soft and dignified, simple and implicit. This design is not only conducive to the drainage of rainwater, but also shows the beauty of the upturned, as if the building condensed into a poetic wonderland. In terms of architectural structure, the prominent features of Korean classical architecture include powerful brackets, curved ridges, large eaves, and thick prisms at the top. These features not only integrate the architectural style of the Korean nation, but also absorb a lot of the form and construction technology of Chinese Tang Dynasty architecture. For example, the architectural group combination form in South Korea not only includes single buildings, but also often consists of multiple single buildings combined into architectural groups or courtyard groups. This architectural combination form is similar to the architectural layout in Chinese classical gardens, which reflects the mutual influence and reference of garden architecture in the two countries in form. Ancient wooden structures in Korea, such as the Boongjeong Temple in Andong, North Gyeongsang Province, and the Daeongongdang Temple in Yesan Sudeok Temple, South Chungcheong Province, exhibit the ancient Korean architectural style. During the Goryeo period, these buildings were deeply influenced by the architectural ideas of China's Song and Yuan dynasties, which not only retained the traditional wooden structure characteristics of Korea, but also integrated the form and technology of Chinese architecture <sup>[7]</sup>. This integration not only reflects the integration of Chinese and Korean cultures, but also shows the similarity and continuity of classical garden

architecture between the two countries. The classical architectural style in Chinese and Korean garden design shows the deep connection between the two countries in garden architecture. Korean classical garden architecture is similar to Chinese classical garden architecture in design concept, architectural form and structure. This similarity not only reflects the history of cultural exchanges between the two countries, but also provides a valuable perspective for us to understand the common characteristics of Chinese and Korean garden design. Through the study of these similarities, we can better understand the mutual influence and integration of Chinese and Korean classical garden architecture in the historical and cultural background.

#### **(4) Both are influenced by the theory of Feng shui**

Both Chinese and Korean landscape design are deeply influenced by the theory of "Feng shui" in landscape layout. This influence is not only reflected in the site selection and layout of the garden, but also in the harmonious relationship between the building and the natural environment. Feng shui theory also plays an important role in Korean gardens. When choosing the location of a garden, Koreans pay special attention to the geographical meaning given by nature and the principles of feng shui. They tend to choose sites with views of mountains and rivers, believing that such sites can add an auspicious atmosphere to the garden. Traditional feng shui theory mentioned that the ideal residential layout should be the back of the mountain to the south, the rocks should form around the "two wings" to embrace the house, such a layout is considered to bring the most ideal feng shui effect. Under the guidance of Yin and Yang theory, the arrangement of water flow is also considered in Korean garden design to ensure that there is water flow in front of the house, in line with feng shui's emphasis on water. In the process of landscape construction, the designer tries to avoid the destruction of natural terrain contours by artificial buildings in order to maintain the natural geomantic pattern. This emphasis on natural topography and feng shui reflects respect for the environment and adherence to traditional culture. Chinese feng shui theory has also had a profound influence on Korean garden design. The "Famous Paintings of the Past Dynasties" recorded the "garden map of the House" and "Yin and Yang House", which occupy an important position in feng shui theory. The "Ten Books of Yin House" described in detail the "theory of good and bad luck in the shape of Yin House" and the "theory of good and bad luck in the shape of Yin House", and expounded the feng shui positions of "left green dragon, right white tiger, front Caracus and back Basanwu" [8]. Korean garden design is influenced by these feng shui concepts, which are reflected in the specific design layout. For example, in the design of Gyeongdeokgung Palace, the Feng shui concept of natural view is reflected, which regards mountains as the foundation of the universe, rocks as its skeleton, water as its blood, trees and flowers as its hair, and fog as its breath. This concept of feng shui is similar to the traditional Chinese theory of feng shui and reflects the resonance of the natural environment and feng shui principles in garden design in both countries. Feng shui theory also played a guiding role when the Joseon dynasty established its capital in Hanyang. For example, Tausan is regarded as the blue dragon, Inwang as the white tiger, Namsan as the Suzaku, Bukak as the Hyeonmu, and Cheonggyecheon as the fengshui layout of Myongtang Water. The application of this feng shui layout ensures the harmonious unity of garden design and natural environment, which reflects the common importance of feng shui theory in garden design of China and South Korea. Both Chinese and Korean garden designs are deeply influenced by feng shui theory. Whether in site selection, layout or architectural design, both countries are guided by the theory of Feng shui, emphasizing a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. This similarity not only reflects the cultural commonality of garden design in China and South Korea, but also shows the important position of feng shui theory in garden design in both countries. Through the study of these similarities, we can better understand the role of feng shui theory in Chinese and Korean garden design and its historical and cultural background.

### **III THE DIFFERENCE OF HUMANISTIC THOUGHT REFLECTED IN CHINESE AND KOREAN ROYAL GARDENS**

The design of imperial gardens in ancient China was heavily influenced by the Confucian etiquette system, which embodied a clear hierarchy and etiquette norms. The layout of these gardens often follows the principle of "different names, different rites", with the venerable in the center and sleeping before and after the court, reflecting a prominent social status and distinguished identity. The architecture of Chinese royal gardens usually emphasizes symmetry and the formation of central axes in the overall layout. For example, the Summer Palace is a typical Chinese imperial garden. In its design, the east-west Buddha Pavilion, Cloud Hall and Longevity Hill and other architectural groups show a rigorous symmetrical layout, while the symmetry of the south mountain and the north water of the corridor further enhances the grandeur of this layout. The use of the central axis is not only based on the clever use of the natural environment, but also adds to the solemn atmosphere of the royal garden, reflecting the authority and magnificent spirit of the emperor. In this design, the relationship between the building and the environment is tight and orderly, demonstrating the imperial garden's emphasis on symbols of power and etiquette norms. In contrast, Korean imperial gardens, especially the rear garden of Changdeokgung, show different humanistic ideas from Chinese imperial gardens. As a model of Korean royal garden, the design concept of Changdeokgung Rear Garden fully embodies the style of "built according to the mountain, with a small view to convey the general idea". The layout of the back court does not have an overly grand open water feature, but is connected to the main palace by a narrow passageway, at the end of which there is an arcadian view. This design concept pays attention to the harmonious integration with the natural environment, pursues the beauty of nature, and emphasizes the microscopic reproduction of the natural landscape. There is no choppy lake in the back garden, nor rolling mountains, but through the delicate stream, quiet pool water and delicate stone, reflecting the peace and harmony of nature. The design of the rear garden of Changdeokgung fully embodies the idea of "Tao Tao nature", that is, to express the essence of nature through exquisite garden design [9]. This design is the pursuit of a miniature natural landscape, through the ingenious construction of small scenery, showing the charm and temperament of mountains and rivers. In Korean gardens, especially the Rear garden of Changdeokgung, this design method of transforming natural landscapes into small scenic spots not only shows the beauty of nature, but also reflects the deep understanding of natural landscapes and unique aesthetic pursuit.



Therefore, there are obvious differences between Chinese and Korean royal gardens in reflecting humanistic thoughts. Chinese royal gardens pay attention to etiquette and authority, reflecting the noble status and solemn atmosphere of the emperor through the magnificent symmetrical layout and the use of the central axis. On the other hand, Korean royal gardens pay more attention to the harmony between nature and people, advocating the general idea of small scenery, emphasizing the beauty of nature and exquisite garden design. The two different design concepts not only reflect their respective cultural backgrounds and historical traditions, but also demonstrate different understandings and expressions of nature and the environment. Through the study of these differences, we can have a deeper understanding of the unique style and cultural value of Chinese and Korean royal gardens in design <sup>[10]</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In the comparative study of Chinese and Korean landscape design, we can clearly see the similarities and differences in landscape architecture and design concepts of the two countries. With Confucian etiquette as the core, the Chinese imperial garden embodies the majesty and authority of the emperor through rigorous symmetrical layout and central axis design. Its garden design not only shows a deep understanding of nature, but also emphasizes the embodiment of etiquette and hierarchy. Korean royal gardens, on the other hand, pursue the harmonious beauty of nature, pay attention to the delicate reproduction of small scenery, and show a delicate and natural aesthetic pursuit through the design built on the mountain and the general meaning of small scenery. This design concept reflects the Korean culture's respect for nature and unique understanding of garden landscape. Through this comparison, we not only realize the cultural and philosophical similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean landscape design, but also understand how landscape design, as a way of cultural expression, forms landscape art with its own characteristics under different historical and cultural backgrounds. The similarities and differences of the two gardens provide us with valuable cultural reference and deepen our understanding of the humanistic thought of garden design.

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