

The Localized Application of Calligraphy Inscriptions and Traditional Chinese painting Imagery in Environmental Landscapes: A Case Study of the Linging Garden Architecture

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, environmental landscapes face the dilemma of cultural homogenization, while the localized experiences of calligraphic inscriptions and Chinese painting imagery in classical gardens offer insights for regional cultural inheritance. This study takes the Linging Garden as its object, analyzing how its calligraphic inscriptions—relying on carriers such as horizontal inscribed boards and couplets—achieve cultural translation through literary allusions, scholarly spirit, and landscape-related themes. From the dimensions of mountains-rivers, flowers-birds, and artistic conception, Chinese painting imagery constructs a three-dimensional pictorial realm through spatial layout and material color. These two elements deeply interact in content, form, and function, forming a cultural space where inscriptions and scenery mutually enhance each other.

KEYWORDS

calligraphic inscriptions; Chinese painting imagery; Linging Garden; localized application; environmental landscape

As important carriers of traditional Chinese culture, the calligraphic inscriptions and Chinese painting imagery in classical gardens are not only forms of artistic expression but also tangible expressions of regional cultural spirit. As an outstanding representative of Chinese classical gardens, the Linging Garden, constructed over three generations during the Ming and Qing dynasties, integrates scholarly garden-making philosophy, calligraphic art, and the artistic conception of Chinese painting. Current academic research on the Linging Garden mainly focuses on architectural layout, garden-making techniques, and cultural heritage conservation, yet systematic studies on how calligraphic inscriptions and Chinese painting imagery embed in spatial environments and activate regional cultural genes remain insufficient. In this context, it is necessary to explore the wisdom of localized application of traditional cultural elements in classical gardens, providing historical experience and innovative approaches for modern environmental landscape design.

This endeavor aims to promote the living inheritance and creative transformation of traditional culture in contemporary settings.

1 Overview of the Architectural Environment and Landscape of the Linging Garden

1.1 Historical Evolution of the Linging Garden

The garden was built in the 21st year of the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty (1593), after Xu Taishi, the junior secretary of the Imperial Household Temple, left his post, he created the East Garden outside the Gate of Heaven in Suzhou, and extensively searched for strange stones to stack up the mountain, chiseled the pool and built the pavilion, laying down the basic pattern of the garden and showing the atmospheric and sparse style of gardening of the Ming Dynasty.

Qing Dynasty Qianlong fifty-nine years (1794), Wu County, Liu Ju purchased the East Garden, taking the "bamboo color cold, clear blue waves," the meaning of the name "Cold Bi Villa". He fetish stone into the interest of the twelve peaks into the garden, planting flowers and trees, additional pavilions, the garden has been quiet and elegant, to the Daoguang years has been renowned.

Xianfeng ten years (1860), part of the building was destroyed in the war. Tongzhi twelve years (1873), Changzhou Shengkang purchased the garden renovation, take "stay between heaven and earth" meaning named "stay in the garden", absorbing the south of the Yangtze River garden techniques, new Guanyun Peak and other landscapes, spatial hierarchy and the landscape architectural integration more subtle.

After three generations of Ming and Qing Dynasty, the Garden has become a microcosm of the evolution of Chinese classical gardens by integrating the gardening concepts of different eras, and was listed as the first batch of national key cultural relics protection units in 1961, and was inscribed on the United Nations World Heritage List in 1997, and is still famous in China and abroad with the charm of "a garden that encompasses all the rhythms of the past and the present".

1.2 Architectural Layout and Features of the Linging Garden

The architectural layout of the Linging Garden centers on a central pond, cleverly divided into four zones: central, eastern, western, and northern. Each zone is independent yet echoes one another, forming an organic whole. The central area is the core landscape zone: south of the pond, halls and chambers are arranged in an orderly scatter; north of the pond, a rockery serves as a natural screen, with winding corridors and pavilions encircling the water, creating a three-dimensional landscape^[1]. The eastern zone excels in architectural grandeur: within its double-eaved corridors and winding paths lie famous rocks like Guan Yun, Rui Yun, and Xiu Yun, with deep courtyards showcasing the delicate beauty of Jiangnan gardens. The western zone features earthen hills and maple forests, evoking a natural, rustic charm; the northern zone presents pastoral scenery, with small peach orchards and grape trellises outlining rural vistas, contrasting vividly with other areas.

The architectural style blends the gentleness of Jiangnan water towns with the elegance of literati gardens, offering diverse forms—pavilions, terraces, towers, halls, studios, and corridors—all harmonious in proportion and graceful in design. The Five Peaks Hall, spanning five bays, is imposing yet adorned with intricate wooden carvings; the Guan Yun Tower, the garden's highest point, features upturned eaves that seem to float, offering panoramic views from its summit. Construction materials—timber for frameworks, stone for rockeries, and brick/tiles for walls—create a rustic atmosphere. Decorations include wood, brick, and stone carvings depicting flowers, birds, figures, and auspicious motifs, integrating artisan craftsmanship with literati aesthetics to showcase the profound and cultural connotations of traditional gardens.

1.3 Elements Constituting the Environmental Landscape of the Linging Garden

The Linging Garden's environmental landscape emerges from the organic fusion of natural, artificial, and cultural elements, embodying the diverse charms of classical gardens.

Natural Elements. Mountains and waters form the skeleton, plants the flesh, and water bodies the veins, creating a harmonious natural realm. The pond, through its zigzag banks, small bridges, and islets, presents layered water scenes; its yellow stone embankments, staggered in height, interact with rocks and architecture, while reflections and fish add vitality.

Artificial Elements. Human ingenuity is evident in the meticulous architectural layout and diverse styles, serving as the landscape's core. Garden paths, meandering and paved with cobblestones and broken bricks in floral or geometric patterns, are both functional and decorative.

Cultural Elements. The garden carries profound cultural heritage. Calligraphic inscriptions and couplets enhance spatial—the strong, vigorous plaque of the Five Peaks Hall and the poetic couplets of the "Reading Paintings Tower"—deepen the meaning of architecture^[2]. Imagery from traditional Chinese paintings inspires the landscape: the western maple forest and rockery resemble an ink-wash painting, with blank spaces and solid scenery in perfect balance.

2 Analysis of the Localization Application of Calligraphy Inscriptions in the Linging Garden Architecture

2.1 Carriers and Distribution of Calligraphy Inscriptions

The calligraphic inscriptions in the Linging Garden are rich and varied in their carriers, forming a hierarchical distribution system based on architectural functions and spatial characteristics. They can be categorized into four main types:

(1) Architectural Plaques – The Finishing Touch to Spatial Identification

Plaques are mainly placed at architectural entrances and main spaces, serving to clarify the building's function and artistic conception. For instance, the "Linging Garden" plaque at the garden's entrance, written in regular script, exudes elegance and grandeur. The wooden plaque contrasts with the garden's black tiles and white walls, becoming the visual starting point of the entire garden. The "Hanbi Shanfang" (Hall Embracing the Azure Hills) plaque in the central hall is inscribed in clerical script, evoking an antique charm as it hangs above the waterside pavilion, harmonizing with the rippling blue waves of the pond. The "Guanyun Lou" (Crown-Cloud Pavilion) plaque in the eastern section, written in running script, features fluid brushstrokes that echo the aesthetic of appreciating rocks within the pavilion, embodying the line "gazing endlessly without wearying of each other."

(2) Couplets – Poetic Extensions of Spatial Ambiance

Couplets often appear in pairs on the sides of halls, pavilions, and kiosks, deepening spatial connotations through antithetical phrasing. For example, the couplet flanking "Hanbi Shanfang" – "One river guards the field, encircling green; Two mountains push open the door, sending verdure" (by Wang Anshi) – connects the waterscape before the viewer with distant mountain imagery, expanding the visual layers of the limited space. The couplet at "Qingfeng Chiguan" (Pavilion

of Breeze and Water) reads, "Spring mountains stretch their azure hues beyond the wall; Flowing water carries floral fragrance to the door," sketching a three-dimensional scene of mountains, water, and flowers outside the pavilion in a minimalist style, creating a poetic dialogue between architecture and nature. Inside "Wufeng Xianguan" (Five-Peak Immortal Hall), the couplet "After rain, quietly observe the mountains' intentions; Before wind, leisurely gaze at the moon's spirit" imbues landscapes and moonlight with humanistic sentiment through personification, enhancing the refined elegance of the scholar's garden^[3].

(3) Steles and Stone Tablets – Solidified Inheritance of Historical Context

Steles are mainly distributed in courtyards, corridors, and tablet galleries, recording garden history, inscriptions by celebrities, or poetic masterpieces. For example, the illustrated steles of Ode to the Twelve Peaks of Hanbi Villa in the eastern courtyard Ji Gu De Geng Chu (Drawing Water with Ancient Ropes), carved during the Jiaqing reign of the Qing Dynasty, document the forms and poetic tributes of the twelve peaks from Liu Shu's era through text and images, serving as crucial historical materials for studying garden evolution. The stone tablet inscribed with "Following the Stream" at the entrance of You Yi Cun (Another Village) in the western section, derived from Tao Yuanming's Peach Blossom Spring, echoes the surrounding pastoral landscapes, suggesting a poetic transition in space. The Record of the Linging Garden steles embedded in the corridor walls detail Sheng Kang's renovation process, presented in meticulous regular script, combining documentary value with calligraphic beauty.

(4) Specialized Carriers – Inscriptions on Window Lintels, Stone Railings, and Furniture

Beyond traditional carriers, the Linging Garden integrates inscriptions into detailed architectural elements. For instance, the brick plaque "Stone Forest Courtyard" in Yi Feng Xuan (Saluting the Peak Pavilion) courtyard, inscribed in clerical script, complements the patterns of the lattice window above it. Small inscriptions like "Fish's Joy" occasionally appear on stone railings by the pond, carved in running script to mirror the dynamic scene of "fish-watching." Even classical furniture such as screens and bookshelves bear miniature inscriptions: the "Nourished by Mist and Clouds" seal script on a bookshelf in Du Hua Lou (Painting-Reading Pavilion) subtly aligns with scholars' spiritual pursuit of "sustaining oneself with paintings as food and books as nourishment."

In terms of distribution patterns, solemn regular and clerical scripts dominate entrances and public spaces, emphasizing identification. Private courtyards and scholarly retreats favor fluid running and cursive scripts, reflecting elegance^[4]. Steles cluster in historical zones like the eastern tablet gallery, forming a linear cultural narrative axis.

2.2 Content and Theme of Calligraphy Inscriptions

The Linging Garden's inscriptions are closely aligned with the garden's artistic conception, forming three thematic systems that deeply integrate literature, philosophy, and natural aesthetics:

(1) Literary Content – Spatial Transcription of Poetic Allusions

Classic poetry and literary allusions are directly quoted or adapted, translating textual imagery into visual scenes. For instance, the "Yuan Cui Pavilion" plaque derives from Fang Gan's line "The distant emerald sky glows half-red with sunset," allowing visitors ascending the pavilion to view western maple forests and distant mountains, merging poetry with vista. The "Osmanthus Fragrance Pavilion" inscription originates from the Shurangama Sutra's parable of "Fragrant Youth Attaining Enlightenment Through Osmanthus Scent," with the pavilion surrounded by osmanthus trees whose autumn fragrance harmonizes with Buddhist enlightenment. The Ke Pavilion couplet "In spring, peach blossom waters flow everywhere; One cannot tell where the fairy source lies" (Wang Wei) reimagines the Peach Blossom Spring allegory, collaborating with the pavilion's waterside setting to evoke an ethereal, otherworldly atmosphere.

(2) Cultural Themes – Multidimensional Expression of Scholarly Spirit

Inscriptions convey the garden owner's and designer's philosophical views and life aspirations. The "Five-Peak Immortal Hall" is named for its rockeries mimicking Mount Lu's Five Old Peaks, with its inscriptions implicitly expressing the owner's yearning for a reclusive life. The "Return to My Study" plaque explicitly values scholarly study spaces, embodying the philosophy of "finding seclusion within the city." The "Guanyun Pavilion's" "Celestial Garden Halting Clouds" inscription both praises the Guan Yun Peak's ethereal beauty and metaphorically conveys the owner's pursuit of noble character, linking stone appreciation with gentlemanly virtue.

(3) Landscape-Linked Content – Expansion of Artistic Conception Across Time and Space

Inscriptions resonate with surrounding scenery, creating an interactive "scene-inscription-emotion" relationship. The "Ming Se Lou" (Bright and Serene Pavilion) plaque references Li Daoyuan's Commentary on the Waterways Classic description of "eyes meeting fish and birds, water and trees bright and serene," capturing the pavilion's clear, tranquil views. The "Green Shade Pavilion" couplet "Cicadas' chirping makes the forest quieter; Birds' songs render the mountains more secluded" (Wang Ji) uses sound to accentuate silence, enhancing the courtyard's serene ambiance. The "Hao Pu Pavilion" name alludes to Zhuangzi's "Viewing Fish at Haoliang" and "Fishing at Pu River" tales. Adjacent to a pond, the name suggests the joy of fish-watching while conveying philosophical detachment, imbuing a small space with profound

cultural significance.

2.3 Artistic Expression forms of Calligraphy Inscriptions

The calligraphic inscriptions in Linger Garden showcase unique ingenuity in artistic expression. In terms of font selection: regular script is used in solemn areas to highlight orthodoxy; clerical script complements natural landscapes; running script embodies scholarly refinement; seal script adorns special carriers to add antiquity and weightiness; and cursive script highlights dynamic imagery as a finishing touch. For carving techniques: negative engraving offers delicacy, positive engraving creates three-dimensionality, the combination of relief and shallow carving merges the beauty of painting and calligraphy, and brick inscriptions integrate the texture of brick grain. Regarding material application: wood exudes warmth and gentleness, stone conveys ancient vigor, grey bricks exhibit simplicity, and metal presents a mottled, weathered charm. Some inscriptions even pursue the brush-and-ink charm of original calligraphy through techniques like blank space composition and simulating the cadence of brushstrokes, transforming the inscriptions into appreciable and readable artworks that achieve deep cultural infiltration^[5].

3 Analysis of the Localization Application of Chinese Painting Imagery in the Architecture of the Linger Garden

3.1 Forms of Expression of Imagery in Traditional Chinese Painting

The garden from the landscape, birds and flowers, the mood of the three dimensions of the presentation of Chinese painting imagery. Landscape, to the central Hanbi Pond as the center, the pool north of the yellow stone rockery layered, simulating the axe-chopping and pima-chopped landscape form; pool east of the Guanyun Peak "thin through the leakage of wrinkles", and the two sides of the peaks to form a three-star column of Roach; the western soil maple forest seems to be like a forest of colorful autumn scenery. Flower and bird imagery fused in the building and plants, such as Hanbi Mountain House, pine, bamboo, lake and stone composition of the three friends of the year, door and window carvings of plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum patterns, wisteria arbor hanging down as the writing of flowers. In terms of mood creation, the moonhole door, leaky windows and the pink wall become a natural frame, framing the bamboo stones, cutting bamboo shadows, and combining the white walls with the actual flowers and trees, forming a Chinese painting mood of real and imaginary.

3.2 The Integration of Traditional Chinese Painting Imagery and Architectural Space

Through the architectural and landscape layout, the Garden realizes the Chinese painting imagery and spatial intertext. The Mingser Building is built near the water, and the reflection becomes double, which is in line with the ink and wash interest of the real and imaginary; the lake rock peak in front of the Five Peaks Immortal Pavilion simulates the five old peaks of Mount Lushan, which forms a contrast between the artificial and the natural with the building.

3.3 The Application of Color and Material in Traditional Chinese Painting Imagery

The colors and materials of the Garden echo the aesthetics of Chinese painting. The whole is based on whitewashed walls and tiles, with chestnut-colored beams and pillars, dark brown doors and windows, and green bricks on the ground, forming a light and elegant tone, and embellished with local vermilion couplets and gold foil plaques. Material, wood texture like pima chapped, stone texture corresponds to the axe chapped and curly cloud chapped, crown cloud peak pits in the light and shadow presents dark and light chapped effect. The water surface is like flowing rice paper, the ripples and reflections are dyed with the meaning of "counting white as black", which makes the architecture, landscape and Chinese painting techniques deeply integrated.

4 The Interactive Relationship between Calligraphy Inscriptions and the localized Application of Traditional Chinese Painting Imagery

4.1 The Mutual Response between Content and Artistic Conception

The inscriptions and imagery of the Garden are mutually interpretive. The plaque of "Yuan Cui Pavilion" transforms the poem into the actual scenery of the forest; "Wen Muxuxiang Xuan" borrows the fragrance of golden laurel to transform the Buddhist philosophy into a perceptible mood. The "Hao Pu Pavilion" uses Zhuangzi's allusion to watching fish, together with the reeds on the rocky outcrops, so that the words can be transformed into a picture of fish playing with

lotus leaves; “Ke Pavilion” couplets use Wang Wei’s poems, and through the peach blossom fringing the shore, the superimposition of poems and paintings can be realized.

4.2 The Harmonious Unity of Form and Style

Inscriptions and imagery echo each other in form. Regular script “Lingering Garden” plaque with symmetrical walls to strengthen the sense of ceremony; official script inscriptions and reliefs of the mountains and rocks are a mixture of rigidity and flexibility^[6]. In terms of carving techniques, yin carving simulates brush strokes, yang carving presents layers of light and shadow, and the golden stone flavor of the brick carving inscription and the pattern of flowers and windows constitute a mix of work and writing aesthetics.

4.3 Complementary Integration of Functions and Roles

The plaque of “Lingering Garden” identifies the space, together with the brick carving of pine and crane, guiding visitors to enter the cultural space; the plaque of the hall implies the nature of the space, combining with the landscape scenery to preview the mood. The inscriptions in the stele gallery sort out the history of the garden, and the Guanyun Peak form the mutual evidence of literature and pictures; the plaque of “Reading and Painting Building” combines with the landscape to sublimate the physical space into a spiritual place for reading poems and paintings, and deepen the cultural connotation.

5 Conclusion

The practice of Lingering Garden shows that the calligraphy inscription is not only a word mark, but also a carrier of cultural meaning, and its interaction with the imagery of Chinese paintings is not a simple superposition of elements, but rather, through the mechanism of “mutual interpretation of inscription and landscape, mutual integration of form and spirit, and complementary functions”, forming a cultural narrative network with regional characteristics. This kind of gardening wisdom, which combines literary context, visual aesthetics and spatial experience, provides valuable inspiration for modern landscape design: on the basis of respecting regional cultural genes, traditional cultural elements can be truly integrated into contemporary life scenes through symbol translation, scene reconstruction and multi-sensory experience design.

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