

THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF EASTERN GARDEN DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Các yếu tố nền tảng của triết lý thiết kế vườn cảnh Phương Đông

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Abstract: The philosophy underlying traditional Eastern Garden design, particularly that of classical Chinese gardens, does not derive from a single intellectual source. Rather, it emerges from an organically integrated triadic system composed of the cosmology of the I Ching (Book of Changes), the Daoist ideal of life, and the operational principles of Feng Shui. The I Ching provides a metaphysical framework concerning transformation, Yin–Yang dynamics, and the order of time and space, thereby forming the ontological foundation of the garden. Daoism endows the garden with the spiritual pursuit of “following the natural way” and achieving “harmony between Heaven and humanity,” transforming the garden into a living realm suitable for contemplation and dwelling. Feng Shui translates philosophical concepts into concrete principles of site selection, energy flow, and spatial organization, functioning as a practical bridge between metaphysics and physical form. These three systems reinforce one another and collectively shape the core philosophy of Eastern gardens: “Though created by human hands, they appear as if formed by Heaven itself.” From the perspective of landscape architecture, this paper examines the internal logic and design transformation of this triadic structure while exploring its implications for contemporary landscape philosophy.

Keywords: Traditional Eastern gardens, I Ching, Daoism, feng shui, garden philosophy, design theory.

Tóm tắt: Triết lý thiết kế vườn truyền thống phương Đông, đặc biệt là vườn cổ điển Trung Quốc, không dựa trên một nguồn tư tưởng duy nhất, mà dựa trên một hệ thống ba yếu tố được tích hợp hữu cơ với vũ trụ học của Kinh Dịch, lý tưởng sống trong Đạo giáo và các nguyên tắc vận hành của Phong Thủy. Kinh Dịch cung cấp một khuôn khổ siêu hình về sự biến đổi, Âm Dương và trật tự của thời gian và không gian, trở

thành nền tảng bản thể luận của vườn. Đạo giáo ban tặng cho vườn tự sự theo đuổi tinh thần “tuân theo quy luật tự nhiên” và “sự hài hòa giữa trời và người”, biến chúng thành một cõi sống có thể ghé thăm và sinh sống. Phong Thủy chuyển đổi các khái niệm triết học thành các nguyên tắc cụ thể về lựa chọn vị trí, dòng chảy năng lượng và bố cục, trở thành một cầu nối thực tiễn giữa siêu hình và vật chất. Ba yếu tố này cùng cố lẫn nhau, cùng nhau xây dựng triết lý thiết kế cốt lõi của vườn phương Đông: “Tuy do con người tạo ra, nhưng dường như được tạo nên bởi trời.” Bài viết này, từ góc độ chuyên môn của kiến trúc cảnh quan, phân tích logic nội tại và sự chuyển đổi thiết kế của cấu trúc ba phần này, đồng thời khám phá những hàm ý của nó đối với triết lý cảnh quan đương đại.

Từ khóa: Vườn truyền thống phương Đông, Kinh Dịch, Đạo giáo, phong thủy, triết lý vườn, quan niệm thiết kế.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Western gardens, design concepts have often been rooted in geometry, perspective, and rational

order. However, Traditional Eastern gardens particularly the private gardens of Jiangnan and the imperial gardens of northern China, embody an entirely different worldview. Rather than seeking to conquer nature, they aspire to engage in dialogue, resonance, and even spiritual union with it.

The fundamental reason for this distinction lies in the comprehensive philosophical system behind Eastern gardens, a system concerned with the cosmos, life, and the human environment. Within this framework, the I Ching provides the “source code” of cosmic formation; Daoism infuses daily life with spiritual meaning; and Feng Shui offers an “operational manual” for environmental organization. Without understanding the interrelationship among these three elements, one cannot truly grasp the spiritual essence of Eastern gardens [1].

This paper aims to systematically examine how the I Ching, Daoism, and Feng Shui have, at different levels, shaped the design philosophy of traditional Eastern gardens, revealing their inherent logical coherence and clarifying their value for contemporary landscape design philosophy.



Figure 1. Suzhou landscape garden (Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theory)

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Figure 2. Panoramic view of the Liu Yuan
(Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theoryll.
Research Materials)

2.1. The I Ching: Cosmological Foundation of Garden Design Philosophy

The I Ching, with its central concepts of change, Yin and Yang, the Eight Trigrams, and the rhythm of time and space, forms the deepest metaphysical foundation of traditional Eastern gardens.

2.1.1. Change and Constancy: The Dynamic Balance of Gardens

The I Ching emphasizes that “change” refers to the eternal transformation of all things in the universe, while “constancy” refers to the enduring laws underlying such transformations. This idea is directly translated into a dynamic philosophy of garden design: a garden is not a static picture, but a living organism that changes with the seasons, time of day, weather conditions, and even the viewer’s emotional state.

Consequently, garden design emphasizes “different scenery in the four seasons and varying atmospheres between dawn and dusk.” At the same time, the overall composition of the garden must adhere to principles of “constancy” – clear distinctions between primary and secondary elements, the mutual generation of solid and void spaces, and uninterrupted flows of energy, ensuring order within transformation.

2.1.2. Yin–Yang Interaction: The Formation of Space and Form

The I Ching states: “The alternation of Yin and Yang is called the Dao” [2]. The concept of Yin and Yang became the most fundamental language of garden design. Mountains are Yin while water is Yang; stillness is Yin while movement is Yang; enclosure is Yin while openness is Yang; solidity is Yin while emptiness is Yang.

Garden design consistently pursues the balance and mutual complementarity of Yin and Yang. For example, a rockery (Yin) is paired with water (Yang); a secluded

pathway (Yin) often leads to a suddenly open courtyard (Yang); and a lofty pavilion (Yang) is balanced by a low waterside terrace (Yin).

This philosophy extends beyond formal aesthetics. It is rooted in the belief that only spaces where Yin and Yang coexist harmoniously can allow Qi—the flow of vital energy—to circulate freely and bring tranquility to the human mind.

2.1.3. The Eight Trigrams and Orientation: Encoding Spatial Order

The Eight Trigrams (*Qian, Kun, Zhen, Xun, Kan, Li, Gen, and Dui*) [2] correspond to eight natural phenomena: Heaven, Earth, Thunder, Wind, Water, Fire, Mountain, and Lake. Together, they form a symbolic system associated with directions, colors, seasons, the Five Elements, body parts, and familial roles.

Traditional gardens frequently incorporate the logic of the Eight Trigrams into the placement of gates, towers, terraces, bridges, wells, and artificial mountains. For instance, garden entrances often face southeast (*Xun*, associated with wind and the circulation of auspicious energy); water features are commonly located in the north or east (*Kan* symbolizes water, while *Zhen* symbolizes movement); and rockeries are typically positioned in the northwest (*Qian*, associated with Heaven and mountains) or southwest (*Kun*, associated with Earth).

Such arrangements are not merely mystical practices, but symbolic spatial philosophies intended to strengthen resonance between humanity and cosmic rhythms. In this way, the garden becomes a miniature “cosmic diagram.”

2.2. Daoism: Spiritual Reflection of Natural Authenticity and Human Existence

If the I Ching explains “how the universe operates,” Daoism answers the question of “how human beings should exist within the universe.” Daoist influence on garden philosophy can be observed on three levels.

2.2.1. “Following Nature”: The Core Definition of the Garden

The *Dao De Jing* states: “Humanity follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows Nature” [3]. Here, “Nature” does not simply refer to the natural world, but to the inherent state of existence itself.

This principle gave rise to the central design concept of Eastern gardens: gardens

should evolve according to natural logic rather than merely imitate natural forms. Therefore, garden design avoids excessive artificial ornamentation and instead values the intrinsic beauty and spontaneity of rocks, water, and vegetation.

2.2.2. “Unity of Heaven and Humanity”: A Spiritual Dwelling for Contemplation

Daoism advocates harmonious coexistence between humanity and all beings under Heaven and Earth, ultimately seeking union with the Dao through spiritual cultivation. As a result, Eastern gardens transcend the purely visual function commonly associated with Western gardens and become spaces for self-cultivation and contemplation.

Structures such as pavilions, terraces, towers, and corridors do not oppose nature; rather, they serve as poetic mediums through which humans interact with it. Scattered among mountains and waters, these architectural elements guide visitors through shifting scenery, enabling them to experience cosmic rhythms and the flow of life through bodily movement and spatial perception, ultimately attaining spiritual freedom.

2.2.3. The Immortal Realm Motif: Penglai and the Ideal of Longevity

The three sacred mountains of Daoist mythology—Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou—became prototypes for the “one pond, three islands” model found in imperial gardens. This design philosophy is not merely aesthetic, but ontological in nature: it creates symbolic spaces through which humans may approach immortality and transcend the limitations of the finite world.

Water symbolizes the vast Eastern Sea, while the three islands represent celestial mountains. Bridges and boats symbolize the possibility of crossing into a transcendent realm beyond ordinary existence.

2.3. Feng Shui: Environmental Transformation and the Logic of Energy

Feng Shui, historically known as Kanyu, is fundamentally a synthesis of ancient Chinese landscape architecture, environmental psychology, and ecology.

2.3.1. Qi as the Core: Spatial Design for Energy Flow

Feng Shui theory holds that all things in the universe are composed of Qi, and that a favorable environment can accumulate

beneficial energy, thereby promoting health and well-being. This concept profoundly influenced garden site selection and spatial organization.

The ideal Feng Shui configuration is described as: “Azure Dragon on the left, White Tiger on the right, Vermilion Bird in front, and Black Tortoise behind.” [2]. In practical terms, this means having protective mountains or elevated terrain at the rear, supportive landforms on both sides, and an open forecourt with flowing water in front.

The essence of this philosophy lies in the belief that spatial form directly influences the quality of Qi, while the quality of Qi shapes the physical and psychological state of the inhabitants. Garden design, therefore, functions fundamentally as a form of environmental therapy.

2.3.2. Curvilinear Forms and the Flow of Energy

Feng Shui avoids rigid straight lines and sharp angles, favoring instead curved and embracing forms [2]. Straight and forceful energy flows are considered harmful, whereas winding pathways allow Qi to circulate gently throughout the environment.

This principle gave rise to meandering garden paths, winding streams, curved corridors, and softly arched rooflines forms that symbolize adaptability, continuity, and nourishment.



Figure 3. Cross-section of the garden
(Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theory)



Figure 4. Garden landscape
(Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theory)



Figure 5. Panoramic view of Chu Cheng Garden
(Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theory)

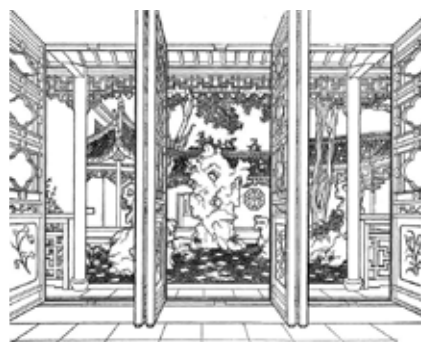


Figure 6. The courtyard of the garden
(Image source: Jiangnan Garden Theory)

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Triadic Mechanism: Integration of the I Ching, Daoism, and Feng Shui

The three philosophical systems discussed above do not function independently; rather, they form an interconnected and mutually reinforcing framework.

From the perspective of design philosophy, this integrated system reflects a distinctly Eastern mode of thinking: philosophy, spirituality, and technical practice are not separated, but unified through the practice of environmental creation. The I Ching represents the “Way” (Dao), Daoism represents the cultivation of human existence, and Feng Shui represents the practical tools of spatial implementation. Together, they constitute the complete philosophical structure of Eastern Garden design.

3.2. Implications for Contemporary Landscape Philosophy

In an age marked by escalating ecological crises and increasing spiritual alienation, revisiting the Eastern garden philosophy shaped by the I Ching, Daoism, and Feng Shui offer enduring relevance.

First, it provides an alternative model of ecological ontology. Unlike modern Western approaches that often emphasize functionalism and humanity’s domination over nature, Eastern Garden philosophy advocates design that follows cosmic rhythms (I Ching),

respects the intrinsic nature of all things (Daoism), and harmonizes environmental energy flows (Feng Shui). This perspective offers valuable intellectual resources for genuinely sustainable design [4].

Second, it encourages a redefinition of “good design.” Good design should not merely satisfy visual pleasure or functional efficiency; it should also serve as a form of environmental healing that harmonizes Yin and Yang, gathers beneficial energy, and nurtures psychological and physical well-being. Contemporary landscape architects, therefore, must integrate psychology, ecology, and semiotics into a more comprehensive design framework.

Finally, it reminds us of the importance of respecting local knowledge and cultural traditions. Feng Shui should not be dismissed as superstition; rather, it represents a form of pre-modern environmental wisdom. Its emphasis on the relationship between energy, spatial form, and human experience strongly resonates with contemporary landscape ecology and environmental behavior studies. The creative reinterpretation of this heritage can help produce designs that are both modern and culturally rooted.

IV. CONCLUSION

The philosophy of traditional Eastern gardens is the product of an organic integration between the cosmology of the I Ching, the life ideals of Daoism, and the operational principles of Feng Shui. The I Ching presents the overarching vision of transformation and Yin–Yang balance; Daoism instills the pursuit of naturalness and spiritual freedom; and Feng Shui provides practical principles for energy accumulation and spatial organization.

Together, these three elements shape a design philosophy in which Eastern gardens are not merely visual compositions, but embodiments of a philosophy of life and environmental stewardship.

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