

Study on the Plant Landscape Creation and Cultural Connotation of Lingnan Gardens

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Abstract

At present, in China, research on the three major elements of classical gardens, namely, rock formations, water management, and planting arrangements, has been relatively mature, but there is still a lack of research from the perspective of landscape plants. Under the influence of historical and cultural factors, religious beliefs, customs and habits, and the natural environment, the Lingnan region gradually formed a unique way of creating plant landscapes and cultural connotations. This article provides a comprehensive discussion on the design of plants in Lingnan gardens through various methods such as literature review and field research. Starting with the two major influencing factors of nature and society, the reasons for the formation of Lingnan garden plant landscapes and the aesthetic basis of their landscape design are analyzed. By studying descriptive texts on Lingnan gardens in relevant literature, poetry, and ancient books, five principles of plant arrangement in Lingnan gardens are summarized and analyzed, namely, functionality, ecology, economics, artistry, and culture. Based on this, the cultural connotations of plant landscapes in Lingnan gardens are explored and the cultural basis for plant selection is extracted.

Keywords

Lingnan garden, Plant landscape construction, Cultural connotation

1. Environmental factors shaping the plant landscape of Lingnan Gardens

1.1 Natural factors

The Lingnan region spans tropical and subtropical zones, with long summers and short winters, abundant sunshine, ample rainfall, complex landforms, dense water networks, and a suitable climate. The plentiful rainfall and comfortable temperatures provide a suitable environment for various animals and plants, leading to a rich variety of ornamental plant species in the Lingnan region. As a result, flowers and trees flourish, remaining evergreen throughout the year, and bearing fruits continuously. This provides a diverse range of plant resources in terms of attractive form, rich colors, and abundant species for landscaping activities in Lingnan gardens.

1.2 Social factors

The Lingnan region is characterized by its mountainous terrain and intricate hills, making land transport inconvenient. As a result, local residents have gradually turned to maritime development, leading to a prospering sea trade and frequent foreign trade exchanges in the area. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the Lingnan region had numerous overseas trading partners, and during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Guangzhou served as the sole trading port, further enhancing trade and shipping activities. The flourishing commodity economy gave rise to a pragmatic aesthetic inclination, and many plants in Lingnan gardens possess both ornamental and practical qualities, which distinguishes them from other gardens.

Moreover, many plant species were introduced to China through trade. Examples include the Bodhi tree, Phoenix wood, and

jackfruit, among others. These exotic plants not only have beautiful shapes and sweet flavors but also gradually acquire diverse cultural connotations through cultural influences. For instance, the Yuyinshanfang in Panyu is associated with the saying, 'Without Yuyinshanfang, there would be no Phoenix wood.' When the flowers blossom, resembling phoenix crowns, they create a natural landscape known as the 'Phoenix Coming in Ceremony.' These imported flowers and fruits have become important landscape plants in Lingnan gardens, enriching the variety of plants in the area.

2. The aesthetic of the plant landscape in Lingnan Gardens

2.1 Practical beauty in a plant arrangement

Planting fruit trees in gardens is a major characteristic of Lingnan gardens. Due to the developed commodity economy and prosperous trade in the Lingnan region, the temperament, spirit, and aesthetic values that have been formed locally have made garden design highly focused on practicality and the integration of aesthetic and utilitarian values. While satisfying daily functional needs, gardens strive to be visually appealing. Therefore, in the process of plant configuration, not only aesthetics has to be considered, but also the practical needs of daily life.

The Lingnan region has a hot and rainy climate, often accompanied by typhoons and heavy rain in summer and winter. Therefore, factors such as sun protection, ventilation, and cooling need to be fully considered. As a result, banana plants are widely planted in Lingnan gardens, as their large leaves provide excellent shade while also creating a serene atmosphere. According to Tao Gu's book "Qing Yi Lu," Guang Zhuo had once visited this place with Princess Li Chan, and they enjoyed themselves in a lush banana grove [1]. In the Su family garden, a grove of banana trees was planted, and their leaves were even referred to as "fairy fans" by Liu Wang of Southern Han.

Lingnan gardens often cultivate fruit trees that have both ornamental value and practical functions, such as lychee, longan, guava, loquat, mango, and pomegranate. For example, in Ke Yuan in Dongguan, lychee and longan trees are the main plants. When the lychee ripens, not only does it provide dense foliage for shade, but it also offers sweet fruit to taste. In addition, some larger Lingnan gardens also plant edible aquatic plants in their ponds. According to the "Guangdong Xin Yu," it is recorded that in the surroundings of Yanshui for more than twenty li, many households grow edible water plants such as water chestnuts, lotus, water bamboo, and water celery [2]. This depicts the scene of planting edibles such as water chestnuts, lotus roots, and water bamboo in the Xiyuan garden in Litchi Bay.

The fruit trees in the garden possess both functional attributes and aesthetic attributes, showcasing the beauty of practical art and forming a unique plant configuration style in Lingnan Gardens.

2.2 Formal beauty of plant configuration

Lingnan gardens in terms of plant configuration inherit the aesthetic tastes of Chinese literati and follow the principle of integrating "artistic conception" and "craftsmanship" in classical garden plant configuration [3].

The aesthetic form of plant configuration includes two categories: the image beauty and the form beauty of plants. Image beauty refers to the beauty of plants demonstrated by their tangible characteristics such as body shape, color, and fragrance, as well as the associations evoked by their unique characteristics in specific environmental conditions. The personality and emotions gifted to plants inject them with unique meaning and connotation [4], such as the purity of the lotus flower rising from the mud or the resilience of pine trees standing tall amidst the cold. Moreover, different emotional experiences are induced in observers when they face plants in differing seasons and weather conditions, for example, the lively atmosphere of "lotus flowers shining bright red in the sun" in summer, and the cold desolation of "a few remaining lotus flowers shivering in the autumn chill".

Form beauty of plant configuration is the creation of aesthetically pleasing organizational forms by combining plants in solitary planting, paired planting, cluster planting, etc. It requires a balance of elements such as size, proportion, and composition [5]. Seeking variation in uniformity and harmony in contrast; leading to picturesque scenes with rhythm and cadence. For instance, in the Qīnghuī garden's bamboo forest, bamboo is widely planted in a narrow and long area, interspersed with pathways and swaying shadows, creating a deep and secluded garden with bamboo as the main theme.

3. Principles of Plant Arrangement in Lingnan Gardens

3.1 Functional principle

Lingnan gardens prioritize their entertainment value, so garden construction and plant arrangement tend to satisfy the social and recreational activities of the garden owner. Flower and fruit trees have strong ornamental and practical qualities. The gardens mainly cultivate lychee, longan, banana, and loquat trees, which have practical value and delicious taste. For example, the Tang Li Garden in the Ming Dynasty had a cascading forest of lychee trees and an interlaced network of rivers, where visitors could enjoy the garden and also taste the delicious fruits. In addition, due to the hot climate in the Lingnan region during summer,

shade is necessary to shield the scorching sun and avoid strong solar radiation. Therefore, it is essential to properly arrange tall trees and shrubs, such as planting large areas of banyan trees to provide shade and create a comfortable and cool garden environment with good ventilation.

3.2 Ecological principle

The saying "the orange tree grows to the north of the Huai River and becomes a trifoliolate orange" indicates that plants cannot grow healthily in unsuitable soil and climate conditions. The selection of plant varieties for cultivation must take into account local factors such as soil environment and climate characteristics, in order to adapt to local conditions and ensure the healthy growth of trees, presenting an optimal state. Furthermore, the Lingnan region is prone to typhoons and heavy rainstorms, and plants grown in gardens must possess the ability to withstand natural disasters in order to ensure the stability of the landscape. Therefore, delicate varieties are not suitable for cultivation in such outdoor environments.

3.3 Economic principle

The arrangement of landscape plants does not depend on quantity but on quality. Therefore, it is not necessary to stack meaningless amounts of plants, but rather to focus on the economy between input and output. The goal is to achieve maximum benefit through the minimum economic investment, while maintaining a balance between input and output, and to reasonably allocate flowers and trees according to actual needs, in order to create a beautiful, economical, and practical plant landscape environment.

3.4 Artistic principle

Artistic and ornamental properties are important attributes of garden plants. When designing gardens, the different characteristics and growth patterns of different plants should be taken into consideration in order to cleverly integrate garden plants with landscape design [6].

Lingnan garden plants can generally be divided into several types: ornamental fruit, ornamental leaves, and ornamental flowers, with some overlap between these categories. Examples of ornamental fruits include lychee, longan, and pomegranate. Examples of ornamental leaves include nine-angle fragrance, elm trees, and Buddhist pine. Examples of ornamental flowers include azaleas, plum blossoms, and osmanthus. In addition to the shape and color of the plants themselves, the arrangement of plants also needs to consider composition, form, proportion, rhythm, and other factors in order to create a plant landscape with artistic beauty.

Furthermore, attention should be paid to the spatial scale of plant arrangement, with a proper understanding of the landscape nodes and traffic flow lines, as well as consideration of the proportion and scale of observation, in order to ensure the reasonableness of the viewing distance.

3.5 Cultural principle

Lingnan plants are one of the manifestations of local culture, closely related to the regional context [7]. After a long historical inheritance and cultural accumulation, many plants have their own cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. For example, the string of firecracker flowers, which bloom around the Spring Festival, have a shape and color similar to firecrackers, thus symbolizing auspiciousness, warding off evil, and praying for blessings and health, representing warmth and joy. In addition, the pomegranate with many seeds symbolizes many children and blessings, the *Ficus macrocarpa* with leaves resembling copper coins symbolizes wealth and treasure, and the turtle back bamboo, with its shape resembling a turtle's shell, symbolizes health and longevity. There are many other plants like these, showcasing the local residents' visions of beauty and their folk culture.

4. Cultural connotation of Lingnan garden landscape plants

4.1 Bede appreciates and recites the elegant literati temperament

With the unification of the six states by Emperor Qin Shihuang, the Qin army conquered Nan Yue and brought with them the culture of the Central Plains. After Zhao Tuo unified Vietnam, he implemented the administrative system and the rituals and music system of the Central Plains within the territory of Nan Yue.

Therefore, early Lingnan culture was influenced by the Chu culture and Confucian culture of the Central Plains. The garden plants also inherited a series of cultural symbols, such as the "Three Friends of Winter" and the "Four Gentlemen in Flowers," which were passed down from the Central Plains. For example, the crimson firecracker flower and lush elm trees in the courtyard of Yuyin Mountain Villa create the scene of "three red bows showered by rain in abundant space, one corner of green clouds in deep shade," using the metaphor of "red rain" to symbolize the ancestral blessings and the "green clouds" to foreshadow the prosperity of future generations.

Moreover, the "green bamboo between walls" in the Bamboo Garden signifies prosperity. By using plants to create an atmosphere and endow them with symbolic meanings or personalities, the garden owners are able to showcase their refined taste and

beautiful aspirations. This technique of garden design is commonly seen in Lingnan gardens, such as the Cold Fragrance Hall in Liang Garden in Foshan, the Bamboo Viewing Pavilion in Zhang Xu's Retirement Residence, and the White Lotus Pond in Yaozhou, all of which demonstrate the aesthetic preferences of ancient literati and elegant guests.

4.2 Functionalism that is both beautiful and elegant and customary

Lingnan gardens are influenced by factors such as the local natural climate, social culture, and mercantile thinking [8]. As a result, they boast a rich variety of plant species and remain evergreen throughout the year, with lush flowers and trees. These gardens exhibit a splendid and diverse cultural connotation and features that combine the beauty of form with practicality.

Additionally, the region has a developed commodity trade, and gardens serve as important social places for garden owners to display their wealth and spiritual character, thus emphasizing the importance of entertainment and socialization in gardens. The culture of plants also demonstrates a secular tendency, with a diverse range of colorful and vibrant flowers and trees [9]. For example, the Liang Garden, known as the "flowers covering the water", showcases the splendid and diverse landscape and cultural characteristics of Lingnan Gardens.

Furthermore, this trend gradually developed a utilitarian culture of emphasizing profit and practicality in local gardening activities through long-term business and trade activities. This led to an emphasis on the functional and practical aspects of the construction planning of gardens. The landscape plants in the gardens also exhibit cultural characteristics that combine practical and ornamental values. There are various fruit trees in the gardens that are both edible and enjoyable, such as bananas, lychees, and loquats. Additionally, there are also edible water plants like lotus roots and water chestnuts, as well as medicinal plants like Chinese red yams and dendrobium orchids. Furthermore, the gardens also feature plants that provide shade and shelter, such as the banyan tree in Liang Garden."

4.3 Mysterious and exotic foreign cultures that are rich in symbolism

The frequent foreign trade has also introduced many new plant species to Lingnan gardens, enriching the variety of landscape plants [10]. Examples of these plant species include Bodhi trees, breadfruit trees, white chicken-egg flowers, and phoenix trees, which have unique and beautiful shapes and are also rich in cultural connotations. Bodhi trees were introduced from India to Guangzhou during the Southern Liang dynasty, with elegant crowns that provide shade, while also embodying profound Buddhist cultural significance. Breadfruit trees were introduced to China during the Sui and Tang dynasties, and their golden fruits have a sweet taste, closely related to Buddhist culture, symbolizing a pure land and a paradise on earth, making them important landscape plants in Lingnan gardens.

The introduction of these exotic plants has brought with it the dissemination of religious and cultural values, injecting even more rich cultural connotations into Lingnan Gardens. In addition, plants such as the phoenix tree symbolizing 'the arrival of the phoenix' and the Javan cotton tree symbolizing 'the success of one's children in the imperial examinations' are also widely planted in the Lingnan region, adding a more abundant meaning and significance to the plants in Lingnan gardens.

5. Conclusion

Under the influence of natural elements, cultural characteristics, and aesthetic concepts in the Lingnan region, the construction methods and cultural connotations of plant landscapes gradually become enriched and developed, forming a unique landscape aesthetic that combines aesthetic and practical values. Moreover, due to prosperous trade, the landscape plants in Lingnan gardens continue to absorb the traits of the Central Plains region and foreign cultures, creating a diverse and adaptable, flexible, and open cultural connotation of landscape plants.

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