

# THE AESTHETIC CONNOTATION OF THE FURNISHING ART OF LITERATI GARDEN ARCHITECTURE IN THE LATE MING DYNASTY

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**Abstract:** After the late Ming Dynasty, Chinese garden art became mature, and representative works introducing garden art such as *The Craft of Gardens*, *Treatise on Superfluous Things* and *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions* emerged, reflecting the life attitude and aesthetic interest of the literati class in the late Ming Dynasty. As an important supplement to garden and architectural art, furnishing art plays an important role in creating artistic atmosphere. Based on the analysis of the above three classic works and some garden cases, it is found that the selection of furnishings by ancient Chinese literati is reflected in the four aspects of 'the appearance of furnishings', 'being practical', 'advocating the ancient and elegant design' and 'vivid artistic conception', reflecting their pursuit of utensils, functional, spiritual and connotation beauty in the furnishing art. Then on this basis, the development path of Chinese style interior furnishing design under the contemporary social background is explored, providing reference for the inheritance and development of Chinese interior furnishing art.

**Keywords:** Chinese classical gardens, furnishing art, *The Craft of Gardens*, *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*

## Introduction

Due to the social unrest and political turmoil in the late Ming Dynasty, the political role of the literati blurred and the cultural role rose, which triggered a wave of attacking the feudal etiquette system. Literati attempted to pursue an ideal life of self-sufficiency and seclusion. In this context, private gardens have become an ideal residence for them to escape from the society and the officialdom. They rushed to buy houses and land in the south of the Yangtze River with a pleasant climate, and integrated their cultural accumulation, life interest and aesthetic pursuit into the gardens, forming a garden form with aesthetic characteristics of the literati class, which greatly influenced the development of classical gardens in China in the Qing Dynasty, making China classical gardens go through five stages from 'overture' to 'all-round development' (Zhang, 2017). The recluse culture formed in China since the Jin Dynasty has also been further developed. However, most of the gardens in the late Ming Dynasty were built for the rich senior official's groups, paying great attention to the quality of life. Their so-called 'living in seclusion' is just a way to escape from reality, to express their weariness of secular struggle and to show their unique aesthetic taste through objects in the gardens. It lacks a sense of complete detachment from the secular world compared to the 'living in the mountains' of Tao Yuanming<sup>1</sup>, who 'picked chrysanthemums under the eastern fence and leisurely saw the southern mountains'<sup>2</sup>, and also lacks a sense of responsibility for the world compared to Du Fu's view of 'wishing to get thousands of vast buildings, so that people suffering from coldness will smile with pleasures' in the Tang Dynasty<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the gardens built in Ming and Qing Dynasties are the products of artistic life. Literati express their life conservation in the form of gardens. They created rich cultural characteristics and representative meanings to the objective materials in various garden elements and furnishings. The existence of these cultural characteristics and representative meanings turns some objects into symbols with clear symbolic meanings.

However, before the Ming Dynasty, China's classical gardens and architectural art were still in continuous development, and it was difficult to form a complete theoretical system. There were few works related to gardens and architectural art, such as *Records of Famous Gardens in Luoyang*, *Collection of Stories from Liyuan Garden*, etc. Some official documents for the ruling class guide urban planning and architectural style, size, grade and practice, such as *Kao Gong Ji: The Record of Ancient Chinese Craftsmanship and Technology* in the Spring and Autumn Period and Song Dynasty's *Yingzao Fashi: The Architectural Codes of the Song Dynasty*. The Qing Government promulgated the *Principles and Regulations of Qing-Style Construction* to clearly stipulate the materials and decoration methods of different architectural. With the rise of literati gardens in the late Ming Dynasty, China classical gardens had accumulated thousands of years of construction experience and design techniques. Then, works, represented by Ji Cheng's *Yuan Ye: The Craft of Gardens*, Wen Zhenheng's *Chang Wu Zhi: Treatise on Superfluous Things* and Li Yu's *Xian Qing Ou Ji: Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*, emerged, which reflected the aesthetic pursuits and life interests of literati. Among them, *The Craft of Gardens* is a monograph on gardening, which constructs the theoretical and practical system of literati garden construction methods and aesthetic standards. *Treatise on Superfluous Things* and *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions* cover many aspects of literati's life, such as bedroom, decoration, furniture, green plants, utensils, music, diet, health care and so on. The three complement each other and comprehensively reflect the life ideal of the intellectuals in the late Ming Dynasty.

'Can be visited and can be lived' are the basic features of classical gardens in China (Li, 2010, p. 225). Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate whether gardening meets the standard and whether it can fully meet the material and spiritual needs of people for appreciation and living. Taking the

literati gardens in the late Ming Dynasty as an example, if the feature of ‘can be visited’ in gardens is mainly reflected in the arrangement and design of elements such as water management, plant configuration and pavilions, then the feature of ‘can be lived’ is mainly based on the planning and design of functional buildings, decorations and the convenience of daily activities. Whether it is ‘can be visited’ or ‘can be lived’, it should be based on the unique aesthetics and outlook on life of Ming and Qing literati, and the two can complement each other. As far as ‘can be lived’ is concerned, the basic functional attributes of the building itself, such as safety, waterproof, good lighting and heat preservation, need not be considered in detail. Simple colours or and elegant decorations should also conform to the traditional aesthetic concept of China and the overall style of the garden space, and another influencing factor, furnishing art, is an important link for meeting the basic requirement of ‘can be lived’. Laozi said, ‘Clay is kneaded to make a vessel, the void of which makes the use of the vessel. Doors and windows are dug for the room, the void of which makes the use of the room’ (*Dao De Jing [Moral and Ethical Classic]*, Chen, Z. trans., p. 62). He also explained the dialectical relationship between building components and building space from a philosophical point of view. Although the indoor space of a building is enclosed by building components, it is precisely because of this enclosed feature that the indoor space becomes a ‘void’ state with nothing, and this ‘void’ state provides the possibility for the development of ancient furnishing art. Wen Zhenheng proposed that if we only pay attention to the beauty of the house and ignore the performance of the interior space, the house will be not exactly practical (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 12). *The Works of Mencius* mentions that the building needs to rely on the trivial things supporting the empty interior space. These things have a function of beautification in the interior decoration of literati gardens.

The beautification mentioned above is a comprehensive and complicated concept, which is mainly reflected in the following four aspects. The first are the aesthetic characteristics of furnishings; The second is the functional beauty produced by optimizing the lifestyle through the use of things; Third, literati consider the cultural connotation and aesthetic characteristics of furnishings, and the spiritual beauty brought by using them to create an ideal environment; Fourth, from the perspective of China's classical aesthetics, furnishings can be used to make a space form a unique beauty. The first two are mainly about the objective attributes of furnishings, while the latter two involve subjective will and external environment. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, three works, Ji Cheng's *The Craft of Gardens*, Wen Zhenheng's *Treatise on Superfluous Things* and Li Yu's *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*, are rich in content, which make a detailed explanation on garden landscape, architectural space and life facilities, and explore the aesthetic connotation of furnishing art from the perspective of literati.

## Literature Review

The art of ancient Chinese furniture and various handmade products had played an important role in the history of Chinese art and even human civilization. The furnishing art formed by their combination with architectural space had always been one of the hotspots of research for Chinese scholars. However, there was still relatively little research on furnishing art from the perspective of ancient Chinese literati living in gardens, and mainly reflected in the following aspects: (1) Targeted analysis of furnishing art and design in specific garden spaces, such as Jingming Garden (Wei, 2022) and Qingyi Garden (Xing, and Wu, 2023; Wu, and Xing, 2022). (2) Restoration of interior decoration in ancient garden and architecture space, such as Taigu Yunlan in Jingji Mountain Villa (Wang, 2022) and Jiede Hall (Lu, 2021) in Chengde Mountain Resort. (3) Targeted research on decoration of garden and architecture space in ancient painting and classics, such as the Ming Dynasty prints of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (Zhang, 2020), *Dream*

of the Red Chamber (Ji, 2019), etc. (4) The production technology of furnishings in ancient gardens and architectural spaces, such as furniture (Wang, 2021), lacquerware (Xue, 2019), flower arrangement art (Zhu, 2023). (5) Analysis of the aesthetic characteristics of home furnishings in the context of garden life, such as aesthetic pursuit (Lu, 2022), display methods (Ma, 2018), layout features (Shi, 2019).

There was also relatively little and incomplete research on furnishing art around the world. Firstly, research on furnishing art was more specific, mainly focusing on the design of home furniture products (Pan, and Wang, 2023; Singh, and Kesarwani, 2023; Muhammad, and Al-Sayed Ali, 2023). Secondly, explanations of furnishing art from the perspective of spatial decorative art within modern design theory. Such as Von Falke (2024) studied decoration and furnishing of the dwelling from the perspectives of history, criticism, and aesthetics; Parsons and Calkins (2022) strived to make the interior space and environment of residential buildings more artistic; Shan (2022) explored and analyzed the evolution of residential decorative art in the 20th century.

In summary, the research content about furnishing art in garden and architecture space was still not comprehensive enough: (1) Previous studies had mostly focused on modern design art, without reviewing and observing Chinese classical gardens and architectural culture based on Chinese classical aesthetics. (2) Existing achievements had mostly analyzed the display situation of certain gardens, paintings, or classics as specific targets, without comprehensively examining the aesthetic characteristics of spatial furnishing art in garden and architecture space from a macro perspective of Ming and Qing literati culture. (3) Although there had been achievements that had paid attention to the influence of literati culture on furnishing art, they had only focused on it as one of the influencing factors and have not conducted in-depth analysis on its impact on the appearance, functional selection, and spiritual core of furnishing art.

### **Furnishing art of Garden Architecture Based on Literati Aesthetics**

Li Yu proposed that both the poor and the rich need to use eating utensils and pointed out the furnishings are necessities in life (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 454)<sup>4</sup>. The scene depicted by Ji Cheng ‘Listening to the wind and playing the qin under the moonlight’ (*Yuan Ye [The Craft of Gardens]*, Jin, X. ed., p. 468) showed a wonderful scene from the perspective of classical aesthetics. It can be seen that the function of furnishings in literati gardens is mainly reflected in two aspects of meeting daily needs and meeting spiritual needs. Furnishing has the dual attributes of ‘supplying’ and ‘displaying’ (Peng, 2016). As far as daily use is concerned, furnishings should meet the basic principles such as the law of appropriate size and good function. In addition, different furnishings should be chosen according to the space of different attributes and layout, so as to maximize the usability of the space; To meet the spiritual needs of literati, it is necessary to consider the aesthetic features of furnishings, achieving harmony between man and the environment (Jin, 2005, pp. 145-149).

### **The beauty of utensils: literati's focus on ‘the appearance of furnishings’**

As objective objects, furnishings are visible and tangible, such as furniture, folding screens, porcelain, etc., all of which have basic aesthetic attributes such as shape, pattern, colour, etc. Beginning in the late Ming Dynasty, the craftsman system cracked, and the status of craftsmen was improved. Some literati also had certain artistic attainments. Some craftsmen had good aesthetic taste through the continuous improvement of their own cultural literacy, which made it possible for craftsmen and literati to communicate. Some literati and some craftsmen had the same aesthetic taste at that time, so they were highly respected (Wang, and Xu, 2018). Although



there is a clear hierarchy difference between literati and craftsmen, in the late Ming Dynasty, the communication between literati and craftsmen became more frequent. For example, Li Yu designed the window frame himself and instructed the craftsmen to make it (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 390). This trend created social conditions for the emergence of a large number of furnishings with more literati participations in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

Every furnishing is the work of ancient Chinese craftsman, which has natural craft beauty. Under the influence of the social environment, the literati in the late Ming Dynasty had a preference for exquisite utensils. For example, Wen Zhenheng explicitly mentioned that from handicrafts such as bells, tripods, and swords, to commonly used items such as brushes, ink, and paper, should all take pleasure in well-crafted (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 249). Well-made utensils can not only reflect the great achievements of social handicrafts at that time, but also reflect the owner's taste. Li Yu also said that 'If some simple daily necessities were exquisitely made, they could also become objects of appreciation in a scholar's home; Even jade materials would become worthless if they were not exquisitely carved.' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 454) It can be seen that Wen Zhenheng highlighted the unique skills of craftsmen. In other words, the artificial skills can be materialized. Human wisdom can help various materials break through their own material value, and gain spiritual meaning, ideological value, and cultural attributes, which are also more in line with the higher-level aesthetic pursuits of literati.

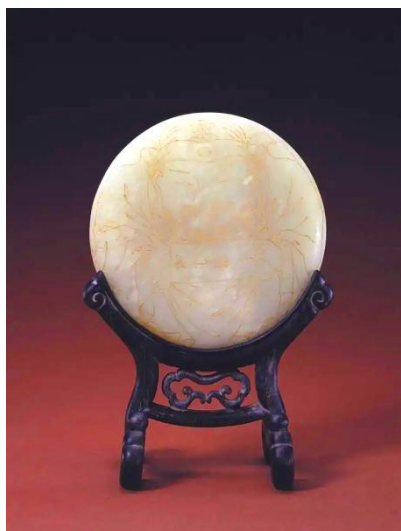
However, influenced by literati painting with free sketch style, the aesthetics since Ming and Qing Dynasties has been completely changed from complicated decoration to simplicity, and 'exquisite' cannot be equated with 'complicated decoration'. For example, Ming-style furniture gradually gave up ornamentation and lacquer decoration in the process of pursuing reasonable compatibility between structure and decoration. Ming-style furniture represented by Su furniture has a unified framework and precise structure, but its shape is simple and refined, and its lines are beautiful and smooth, which fully embodies the unity of structure and shape, simplicity and beauty (see Figure 1)<sup>5</sup>.



**Figure 1: Ming Dynasty Huanghuali High-arm Southern Official's Hat Chair (Collection of The Summer Palace)**

Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1714336384654484740&wfr=spider&for=pc>

Wen Zhenheng admired the furniture which was simple in shape, and believed that furniture decorated with marble and shells was not elegant (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 228). Wen Zhenheng's aesthetic view on furniture is consistent with Ji Cheng's view of 'pursuing elegance and simplicity' (*Yuan Ye [The Craft of Gardens]*, Jin, X. ed., p. 495) and Li Yu's 'being simple but not complicated, being natural' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 392). In the late Ming Dynasty, the literati gardens in the south of the Yangtze River often avoided using over-carved architectural decoration, but also to the heavy-colored beam-arch decoration, which led to the 'white wall as the keynote, with black-gray tile roofs and chestnut shell-colored beams and columns' (Liu, 1979, p. 28). The interior decoration was mostly light brown or wood color, lined with white walls and water mills. Therefore, the furnishings of literati gardens need to be elegant in color. For example, Wen Zhenheng thought that the color of the fragrance box should be 'as simple and soft as the color of coral, rather than decorated with many colors' (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 253). As far as the color of the incense box is concerned, the incense box with relatively uniform hue and soft color change is better than the five-color one with green leaves and red flowers. It can be seen that in terms of the shape and color of furnishings, the literati in the late Ming Dynasty had their own views, and always took simplicity, elegance and refinement as the highest aesthetic standards (see Figure 2)<sup>6</sup>.



**Figure 1: A jade screen decoration from Ming Dynasty (Collection of Beijing Palace Museum)**

Source: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/jade/232056>

### **Functional beauty: the literati's thought of 'being practical'**

Building components are surrounded by houses and spaces. However, from a dialectical point of view, if a house is uninhabited, in fact, it cannot be a real house. Furniture, incense burners, cups and other utensils except antiques, paintings, vases and other works of art, as items with specific functions, need to be used by people to improve the quality of life. As Wen Zhenheng said, ancient people pursued the functionality of objects and did not even care about the high cost (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 249). When Li Yu talked about desks, he must mention the drawers on them. He said, 'It can be used as a place for small item storage' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 457). This reflects the literati class's thought of 'still in use' of furnishings at that time.

Due to the desire of literati in the late Ming Dynasty for pleasure, leisure, and freedom, the ‘still in use’ nature of indoor objects was further highlighted. On the one hand, the literati class often takes pleasure in collecting things from incense burners and inkstones to folding screens and beds, with function as the basic criterion. For example, the pen containers made by Xiang bamboo, palm, moso bamboo and Baiding bamboo are the best, pointing out the four best materials for making pen containers and the pen container made by these materials is both exquisite and durable (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 262). On the other hand, the social environment in the late Ming Dynasty greatly stimulated the creativity of craftsmen, and constantly brought forth new ideas to maximize the quality of life and meet spiritual needs of literati. Li Yu described his design cases of furniture in *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*. For example, in several cases, partition boards were set to prevent fire and cracks, ‘warm chairs’ were invented to resist the cold in winter (see Figure 3)<sup>7</sup>, and ‘cool mats’ were invented to resist the heat, and bed curtains were improved to make the sleeping environment comfortable and beautiful. Li Yu was a master of daily life aesthetics for his ingenuity in improving the quality of life.



**Figure 3: Illustration of the ‘Warm Chair’ in *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions***

Source: *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2014, p 463.

In addition, in order to pursue comfort, literati in the late Ming Dynasty applied knowledge of ergonomics to furniture design. For example, the S-shaped backrest and wicker seat surface in Ming style armchairs solve the shortcomings of traditional furniture, making users more comfortable while maintaining a dignified sitting posture, reflecting the balance between traditional etiquette and human needs (see Figure 4)<sup>8</sup>.



**Figure 4: Ming Dynasty Huanghuali Four-protruding-head Official's Hat Chair  
(Collection of Shanghai Museum)**

Source: <https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/CI00160579>

Ji Cheng described that: In cool summer pavilions you could play drinking-games, mix ice with your drinks, and feel the breeze rising among the bamboos and trees; In warm winter apartments you could gather round the stove, and melt snow to make your tea while the water bubbles in the wine-warmer (Yuan Ye [*The Craft of Gardens*], Jin, X. ed., p. 467). Cups, stoves and kettles are placed in the space, and their functions are the premise of people's activities, and at the same time, people's activities can become purposeful, emotional and contextualized. It is precisely because of the tireless pursuit of a leisurely and happy life by the literati group in the late Ming Dynasty that indoor furnishings pay more attention to the improvement of humanized functions on the basis of the appearance beauty, so that the functional beauty of utensils can be highlighted.

#### **Spiritual beauty: the literati's spiritual pursuit of 'advocating the ancient and elegant design'**

In *The Craft of Gardens*, Ji Cheng put forward that erecting stones to block the scenery highlights the aesthetic pursuit of the literati garden, reflecting the influence of the literati's thinking mode on garden landscaping. And Wen Zhenheng also proposed that the stones in front of the house make the house secret in *Treatise on Superfluous Things*. It is not difficult to see that whether it is the setting of landscaping elements or the placement of garden furniture, the Ming Dynasty literati must pay attention to personal emotional comfort in addition to daily use when choosing and furnishing. In addition to considering the beauty and the functions of furnishings, the furnishings of gardens should also have the spiritual function of expressing the owner's psychological pursuit, which raises the selection, combination and arrangement of furnishings to the spiritual level. The furnishings are no longer the placement of daily utensils, but the artistic expression of the owner's psychological activities and pursuit. The formation of furnishing art is based on the owner's cultural accomplishment and aesthetic attainments, which is mainly reflected in his of her spiritual pursuit of 'advocating the ancient and elegant design'. Advocating the ancient design means attaching importance to cultural traditions and history, which is a way for literati to keep themselves and seek the truth. Advocating the elegant design highlights the importance of the elegance and simplicity of furnishings (Li, and Chen, 2017).



Literati in the late Ming Dynasty advocated the ancient design. They are good at poetry, calligraphy and painting, and admire Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Their view of 'valuing the ancient works' reflect their love for antiques. Li Yu said, 'People's love for antiques has reached its peak since the Han, Wei, Jin and Tang Dynasties' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 484), which reflects the literati's willingness to collect antiques at that time. As far as garden architecture is concerned, the trend of 'valuing the past' is also discussed in *The Craft of Gardens*, which has many allusions, covering almost the time span from ancient times to the Song and Yuan Dynasties. However, the trend of 'valuing the past' here does not mean standing still and sticking to the old ways. Instead, the literati take the noble character of ancient people as their pursuit of life, which is reflected in the pursuit of quaint and simple style in art.

Due to the influence of China's ancient aesthetic view of 'Harmony Between Man and Nature' and 'the Tao follows its own nature', the trend of 'valuing the past' also reflects the admiration of natural beauty. 'Nature' has two meanings in the Taoist philosophy system, one is 'nature' in the real nature, and the other is 'naturalness'. Literati worshiped the ancient designs, and pursue the aesthetic idea which is naturally formed after years of baptism and the choice of the times, and conforms to the thinking mode of intellectuals in society, that is, pursuing plain, natural, true and simple things. For example, 'the designer of Zen chairs should be woven from natural vines or carved from ancient tree roots, and the traces of artificial carving should be concealed to the greatest extent possible' (*Chang Wu Zhi [Records of Superfluous Things]*, Li, R. trans., p. 231). This design idea reflects the balance between furnishings and external environment, and this is fully demonstrated in the handicrafts left over from the Ming Dynasty (see Figure 5)<sup>9</sup>.



**Figure 5: A poetic armrest made of white jade from Ming dynasty (Collection of Taipei National Palace Museum)**

Source: [http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0221/16/16156500\\_536212645.shtml](http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0221/16/16156500_536212645.shtml)

### **The beauty of connotation: the literati's aesthetic tendency of 'vivid artistic conception'**

The 'greatness' mentioned by Mencius does not refer to the objective size of objects, but to the connotation generated by the reflection of objective things in people's hearts. Although this connotation is unpredictable, it can form a 'field' like a halo, which affects people's psychological

feelings. When furnishings are placed in the indoor and outdoor space, the ‘field’ is enlarged, and together with the surrounding environment, the aesthetic connotation of China traditional garden art is formed. Therefore, it is the key point to ensure this aesthetic connotation can show human talents in these places, so that people can enter their homes and feel the charm of furnishings.

However, influenced by the Confucian etiquette system, the interior furnishings of ancient buildings in China pay attention to hierarchy and spatial order, such as the strict layout with symmetrical central axis and the etiquette idea of ‘the room in the west is more noble’, reflecting the layout principle of interior furnishings. This kind of layout principle is also reflected in the garden space where literati can have a walk around and live. For example, the Wanjuan Hall Suzhou Wangshi Garden has exquisite furniture, decorations and antiques, and the lanterns are simple in shape and eye-catching in color. All furnishings show a sense of etiquette, with a clear and symmetrical layout. As the main building of the garden, is a very formal place for the owner to receive guests and friends. Therefore, its furnishings are formal, and it is much simpler than ordinary official residences. Moreover, the layout, which is obviously different from the common official residence, pay more attention to the private space of literati for study and entertainment. The site of teahouse and greenhouse fully reflects the life style of literati in the late Ming Dynasty (see Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Wanjuan Hall of The Master of the Nets Garden in Suzhou**

Source: Filming by the author

But in the late Ming Dynasty, literati also pursued the life style of ‘vivid artistic conception’ very much, and combined spirit, thought and furnishings to meet their psychological needs through subjective judgment. ‘Yun (rhyme)’ is a very important aesthetic concept in China's classical aesthetics. Since its appearance between Han and Wei Dynasties, the word ‘Yun’ has spread to almost all artistic fields in Song Dynasty and become the highest standard of art works. Fundamentally speaking, ‘Yun’ is similar to the ‘Guanghui (brilliance)’ mentioned by Mencius. It refers to the unique aesthetic meaning of the objective object, and it is the reflection of the important philosophical concept ‘Tao’ in environmental art. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a series of furniture matching with the study has been produced, and scholars have also materialized their favourite things or activities into daily decorative furnishings in their study. For example, burning incense, playing Guqin, drinking tea, watching the moon, appreciating

calligraphy and paintings were all activities literati liked, so the ancient books, Guqin, cups, lamps, aniques, incense burners and other utensils can help to create an elegant and unique cultural atmosphere. Therefore, literati's pursuit of 'being sage inside' is materialized in order to form a 'field' that conforms to the literati's identity and inner pursuit. As shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8.



**Figure 7: Wufeng Study Room of The Master of the Nets Garden in Suzhou**

Source: Filming by the author



**Figure 8: Yuanxiang Hall of the Master of The Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou**

Source: Filming by the author

When the 'vivid artistic conception' in the architectural environment is combined with the aesthetic pursuit of literati, the artistic beauty of literati gardens in the late Ming Dynasty is completely reflected. Outside the house, they indulged in this profusion of moonlight and lotus fragrance, and inside the house, they played Guqin and read books. And being in such a wonderful place, the literati feel good when they wake up.

### Chinese Interior Furnishing Design under the Current Social Background

The reform and opening-up policy helped to connect China with the world, followed by the influx of western modernism, internationalism and other artistic trends. The new Chinese style design



once became an important way to solve the contradiction between traditional decorative forms and modern architecture. In the new era, the main contradiction in China is the contradiction between the people's growing need for a better life and the unbalanced development, so interior design, as an important way to beautify the living environment and improve the life quality, is facing an important turning point. As an important part of architectural art, furnishing art should also change with the development of the times, so how to make the interior design and furnishing with new Chinese style more in line with people's aesthetic needs in the new era is one of the important issues to be studied urgently.

### **Give full play to the main role of people**

Li Yu once said that 'Vision is related to the state of mind. If people want to liven their hearts, they should liven their eyes first' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 520). Furnishing art is one of the important ways to liven their eyes. In the late Ming Dynasty, the furnishing art conformed to the psychological needs and aesthetic concepts of literati at that time, and to the artistic style of garden at that time. Therefore, the furnishings and furnishing art focus on beauty, utility, elegance and rhyme, which made the literati feel refreshed. However, the extreme complexity and huge inclusiveness of contemporary society make people's living conditions, life pursuits and thinking modes different, and make architectural styles and spatial layouts have great differences. First, the people-oriented principle is needed to put into practice, and it will be carried out on the premise of fully understanding the user's needs, instead of starting from the designer's personal preference and artistic pursuit.

### **Using modern technology to improve the aesthetics and usability of furnishings**

No matter work or life, daily necessities are the largest furnishings in the general indoor environment, which profoundly affect the beauty of indoor environment and people's psychological feelings. Song Dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi once said, 'practicing Tao is a good way for people to behave well in daily life'. A seemingly insignificant commodity in life may become an important part of daily life, supporting the 'Tao' of life. Today, with the rapid development of science and technology, our access to materials and the efficiency of producing utensils are not the same as those of the ancients. However, we should not ignore the role of 'beauty' as a basic attribute of utensils. Instead, we should give full play to our technological advantages and further inherit and carry forward China's classical aesthetics.

On the other hand, the usability of furnishings is also worthy of further exploration, which not only refers to its usability as a specific object, but also refers to its usability in the development of interior furnishing art, that is, to make it complete the transformation while forming excellent functions. 'The house can't be moved, and everything else can be replaced' (*Xian Qing Ou Ji [Casual Reflections on Leisure Pursuits]*, Du, S. trans., p. 520). Compared with the space composition art and interface decoration art of buildings, the furnishings have the characteristics of 'living', and they can be moved and replaced at any time according to seasons, festivals, owners' preferences and usage habits. We should learn from the wisdom of the ancients in order to continuously improve the usability of daily utensils.

### **Further explore the symbolic transformation of aesthetic elements**

'The symbolic cultural meaning of art lies in explaining the attitude of human to nature, and the appearance and relative stability of abstract language as an artistic expression is an important cultural phenomenon in the 20th century' (Liu, 2017), which becomes particularly popular after entering the 21st century. The new Chinese style, which flourished in 1970s and 1980s, has changed with the times. The contemporary Chinese style seems to have got rid of the shackles of



traditional aesthetic elements and expressions, and a more concise and representative aesthetic language has become an important content in the artistic expression of contemporary interior design, which is the process of symbolizing beauty. Furnishing art should also undergo symbolic transformation, abstract the aesthetic characteristics of traditional utensils, and explore the application of contemporary design language in furnishing art on the basis of finding the most basic design rules, so as to provide theoretical basis and practical methods for the development of interior furnishing art. For example, taking the design of chairs in Ming and Qing Dynasties as an example, the scientific method is used to extract the design elements and the semantics of perceptual images, so as to accurately reflect the cultural connotation and aesthetic characteristics of furniture in Ming and Qing Dynasties, and then provide a feasible path for exploring the design methods of furnishings.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the impact of furnishings on the environment of gardens and architectural spaces is mainly reflected in the following four aspects: (1) The aesthetic characteristics of objects themselves due to arts and crafts, that is, the appearance beauty of objects themselves. (2) Objects provide convenience for daily activities and significantly enhance the usability of gardens and architectural spaces, which is a manifestation of the functional beauty of items. (3) The cultural connotation and aesthetic characteristics of objects can meet people's psychological needs and idealize the spatial environment of gardens and buildings, which is the spiritual beauty of objects. (4) From the perspective of classical Chinese aesthetics, objects or combinations of various objects were integrated with the overall environment of architecture and gardens, creating a unique and meaningful beauty in the entire space. The first two mainly focus on the objective attributes of the display itself, while the latter two combine it with the subjective will of the user and the external environment, further elevating the overall display to the level of display art and expanding its aesthetic connotation.

Every piece of interior furnishings in ancient times is the crystallization of the wisdom of the working people in China. They practiced the idea of *Kao Gong Ji: The Record of Ancient Chinese Craftsmanship and Technology* about 'it is necessary to consider the changes in seasons, climate, the quality of materials, and the differences in craftsmanship' with their hands. The architectural art reflected in literati gardens is the externalization of the individual life concepts, lifestyles and ideological pursuits of literati. 'People can become smart with ears and eyes, and can come up with wisdom and skills with a mind. It's just that they are stuck in self-limiting beliefs, and have never exhausted to try' (Li Yu's words in *Occasional Notes of Idle Emotions*). The traditional culture and classical aesthetics represented by China's classical garden architecture art are an inexhaustible treasure, which is worth every contemporary artist and designer's efforts for its inheritance and development.

## Notes

1 Tao Qian (approximately 365-427 AD), also known as 'Yuanming', 'Yuanliang', 'Mr. Wuliu' and 'Mr. Jingjie', was an outstanding literatus from Chaisang County in Xunyang Commandery (now Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province). His poem *Drinking Alone* reads: "I build a hut amidst the madding crowd. But no more wheels and hoofs ring loud. You may wonder and ask me how. Solitude a solitary heart will endow. Plucking chrysanthemums by the eastern fence. Unknowingly I see the southern mountain thence. The evening brings in fresh mountain air. Birds are returning home from elsewhere. In such things the true meaning of life lies. I'm about to explain, but explanation it defies." This best represents his spirit of living in seclusion.

- 2 'Living in the mountains' refers to completely distancing oneself from the secular world, and immersing oneself in nature.
- 3 Du Fu (712-770 AD), with the courtesy name 'Zimei' and called himself 'Shaoling Yelao', was a great realist poet of the Tang Dynasty and was revered as the 'master poet' by later generations. Although Du Fu failed repeatedly in his political career, he often held onto the idea of 'benevolent governance'. His poem *My Cottage Unroofed By Autumn Gales* best reflects his great pursuit of caring for the country and the people, with the phrase "wishing to get thousands of vast buildings, so that people suffering from coldness will smile with pleasures".
- 4 In Chinese residential culture and environmental art, furnishings not only refer to furniture products such as tables, chairs, and benches, but also include daily necessities, stationery accessories, musical instruments, calligraphy and painting works, handicrafts, sculptures, potted plants, fabrics, and all other items in gardens and architectural spaces except for building components.
- 5 This chair is a classic of Su furniture, made of Huanghua pear. It has a simple appearance and beautiful shape. The decorative elements are rich but not complicated, and the lines are winding and smooth. It is one of the important representatives of Ming style furniture in China.
- 6 This jade screen decoration only involved simple carving of the jade, maximizing the preservation of the natural beauty of it, and even the shelf for placing it was also very simple.
- 7 The 'warm chair' was designed by Li Yu to deal with the harsh cold winters. Metal drawers were set below the chair and table, and charcoal fire was placed inside to keep warm.
- 8 The armchair was the official chair of ancient feudal society in China, made of hard material. In addition, due to the constraints of ancient etiquette, people need to sit upright, which further exacerbates the discomfort. This chair has replaced the wooden seat with a rattan seat, increasing its softness and breathability. At the same time, the S-shaped backrest is more in line with the shape of the human spine, in order to reduce fatigue.
- 9 Armrest, one of the stationery items of literati, was used to put the arms when writing and painting with a brush, preventing ink from dirtying the sleeves and preventing sweat dirtying the paper. This armrest is not only simple and beautiful, but its bamboo decoration also reflects the literati's pursuit of refined culture (bamboo is a symbol of noble personality in traditional Chinese culture).

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