

# Visualising the Harmonious and Symbolic Meaning of Spring and Summer Plant Landscaping in Contemporary Chinese Gardens through Painting

Jingjing Zhao, Mohd Fauzi Sedon\*

Faculty of Art, Sustainability & Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia  
Correspondence Author Email: mohd.fauzi@fskik.upsi.edu.my

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## Abstracts

In the design and construction of modern Chinese gardens, harmony is a central symbol woven throughout the creative process. Garden designers strive to craft harmonious environments through thoughtful landscapes. This symbolism of harmony is expressed in two primary forms: the first, the harmony of yin and yang which rooted in Taoist philosophy that reflecting a balance and unity; and the second is the harmony of contemporary natural ecology, focuses on the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing how to achieve harmonious coexistence in today's society. This research adopts a studio practice approach to explore the specific representations of harmony through experimentation and context-driven explorations within the studio. The works of Deng Guoyuan, Damien Hirst, and Yuichi Hirako are the three key artists featured in the research. Their works centered around the theme of gardens, showcasing the relationship between humans and nature through their unique perspectives and expressions. The project examines the dynamic relationship and evolving sense of harmony in nature, as well as the rhythm of life through the lens of time. This research could enhance understanding of how plant landscaping in contemporary Chinese gardens embodies cultural and symbolic meanings tied to the seasons. By visualizing these concepts, the study underscores the importance of preserving and interpreting traditional cultural values in modern contexts. It also offers opportunities for further exploration into the intersection of nature, symbolism, and cultural heritage in contemporary design practices.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Chinese Gardens, Plant Landscaping, Symbolism, Harmony, Environment.

## Introduction

In contemporary Chinese garden art, the central goal is to create a harmonious garden environment, a concept deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese philosophy of yin and yang.

This philosophy, which originates from Taoism and is influenced by Confucianism, explains the fundamental nature of all things by reducing them to two complementary forces—yin and yang—that form an inseparable unity. As Jafari (2024) explains, Taoists believe that every natural object in the world is a blend of these two forces, with the doctrine of yin and yang being rooted in the Tao, a principle that governs nature and underpins Chinese thought and cosmology. The doctrine of yin and yang highlights the interdependence of its two aspects, which together form a unified whole. In traditional Taoist philosophy, this doctrine explains the relationship between yin and yang and their manifestation in garden elements such as architecture, water, and plants. Sun (2013) argues that the doctrine promotes balance and harmony in the world, suggesting that a simple spatial layout is crucial for maintaining this balance. Such a layout enables individuals to achieve inner tranquility and counterbalance the complexities of the external environment.

Taoist philosophy inherently carries ecological implications, asserting that humans and all other living beings have an equal right to exist. As the dominant species, humans hold the responsibility to maintain ecological awareness and ensure the harmonious coexistence of humanity and the natural world. Zhang (2022, p. 29) emphasizes that fostering an ecological relationship based on harmonious coexistence, symbiosis, and mutual prosperity should be a top priority. Plants play a crucial role in enhancing environmental ecology. Through processes like photosynthesis, transpiration, absorption, and adsorption, plants help regulate the microclimate, prevent wind and dust, reduce noise, and absorb harmful substances, thus purifying air and water while protecting the ecological environment. Chen (2020) underscores the holistic nature of ecological systems, urging designers to preserve natural vegetation continuity, create buildings that integrate with the natural environment, and achieve harmony and unity between natural and urban landscapes.

### *Project Outline*

This research project used studio practice method through painting creation that examine the symbolic connotations of harmony in the landscaping of contemporary Chinese gardens. The project used oil paintings as a medium and composing multiple photographs of contemporary Chinese gardens to construct visual environments through its representation as follows:

- i. To analyse the theoretical foundation of the unity of heaven and man, focusing on the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, and to explore how contemporary Chinese gardens reflect this symbolic spiritual meaning through the balanced spatial arrangement of garden plants.
- ii. To showcase the seasonal changes in the garden during spring and summer, highlighting the harmonious symbolic design of the garden space that creates visually dynamic seasonal transitions, while reflecting the contemporary symbolic aesthetic representation of plants in Chinese gardens.

### **Related Theoretical Ideas**

#### *Unity of Heaven and Mankind*

The concept of the unity of heaven and mankind emphasises the harmony between man and nature. It implies that human beings should conform to the laws of nature, harmonise with the environment and pursue internal and external harmony and balance. This spirit of harmony holds that human beings cannot exist apart from nature, but should co-exist and co-

prosper with it. By living in harmony with nature, people can achieve physical and mental balance, social stability, and environmental sustainability (Xu, 2024). The harmony of yin and yang is rooted in Taoist philosophy, and Wu (2017) asserts that the ecological concept of "man living in harmony with nature" embodies a profound ecological awareness. Laozi's philosophy emphasizes living in harmony with nature, the universe, or the Tao, encouraging people to follow the natural principles and align their actions with the Tao. This state is known as celestial unity in Chinese thought, meaning that the human world and the external universe are interconnected as one (Lee, 2003).

In contemporary environmental design, Chen (2020) highlights the holistic nature of ecological systems, emphasizing that designers should prioritize the continuity of natural vegetation and create buildings that align with the natural environment. This includes maintaining vegetation continuity, developing plant landscapes that meet ecological requirements, and ensuring the harmonious integration of natural and urban landscapes. As a result, environmental philosophical concepts like "the unity of heaven and man" play a crucial role in these discussions (Cheng, 2013, p. 234). Environmental philosophy promotes an equal and respectful relationship between humans and nature, encouraging us to honour nature, protect the environment, and pursue sustainable development. This philosophy serves as a valuable guide in shaping our attitudes and actions toward the environment, fostering a more harmonious and balanced relationship between humans and nature (Xu, 2024).

Gardens are an essential aspect of landscape architecture, which as a discipline focuses on placing elements in a way that promotes environmental harmony. This concept extends beyond just physical or social phenomena; it also encompasses spiritual dimensions. Our world is in urgent need of a spiritual perspective that reconnects humanity with nature, linking human culture with the power of the natural world. This view sees cities and landscapes as interconnected, organic systems (Jakupi, 2016). The traditional Chinese belief in the Harmony between Man and Nature emphasizes that humans must recognize their place within nature, avoiding a self-centered approach. It advocates for a relationship of harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. People have proposed strategies to address the current issues between humanity and nature, shifting from the notion of conquering nature to one of adapting to and utilizing it. This shift not only benefits human interests but also reflects the deeper value of human survival (Guo, 2018).

## Related Art Practices

Deng Guoyuan



Figure 1. In the Garden No. 9, Ink on paper, 2004, 122x122cm.

In his "In the Garden" series, Deng Guoyuan makes extensive use of black, white, and grey ink lines to portray nearly abstract landscapes. His style is reminiscent of late Impressionism, where he evokes a sense of emptiness and ambiguity through the interplay of wet and dry techniques and ink staining. From Guoyuan's viewpoint, the garden represents not just nature but also the product of human intervention in nature. His works explore the relationship between humans and nature by emphasizing the boundaries between the natural and the artificial. Guoyuan (2015) explained that Chinese gardens reflect a fundamental relationship between humans and nature. In his "In the Garden" series, he sought to emphasize the presence of people within the artwork, highlighting the interaction between the viewer and the image. The garden is not merely something to observe but a space you inhabit, symbolizing the need to rediscover our connection to nature. Similarly, Beate (2020) notes that works titled "In the Garden" often focus on the cultivated, enclosed, and therefore analyzable nature of the garden. In Guoyuan's work, the garden becomes a distinct, enclosed space that symbolically conveys the essence of life in a unique and profound way.

Damien Hirst



Figure 2. Garden of Celebration, Oil on canvas, 2023 , 213.4 x 182.9 cm

This painting is part of Hirst's *Secret Garden* series, featuring vibrant colours and dynamic brushstrokes that capture garden scenes. He portrays flowers and shrubs with rapid yet convincing detail, incorporating deliberate blurring and introducing abstraction by splashing thick paint onto the canvas. This technique creates a vivid network of bright splashes, which Hirst likens to pollen or something that evokes stimulation. These paintings do more than

represent gardens; they encourage a deeper reflection on our connection with the environment.

Westall (2023) notes that in *Gardens of Celebration*, Hirst portrays flourishing gardens where various species of brightly coloured flowers emerge from lush surroundings, blending the designed with the natural, the harmonious with the chaotic. The central theme of *Secrets* explores the interrelationship between humans and the environment. Hirst's work serves as a canvas for this complex relationship, depicting humanity's attempts to control nature and the inherent futility of such efforts (Bellos, 2024). This piece serves as an artistic reflection on the delicate balance between humans and nature, a theme that resonates in a society increasingly conscious of its environmental impact. It underscores the fragile equilibrium between human progress and the preservation of natural beauty.

Yuichi Hirako



Figure 3. *Memories of My Garden*, Acrylic on canvas, 2010, 130 x 162cm

"Memories of My Garden" is a significant reflecting his profound reflections on the relationship between nature and humanity. The works feature rich colours and intricate brushwork to portray mysterious natural scenes. The dense foliage of trees and the wildly curved branches of tree trunks capture the essence of the natural environment. Subtle man-made elements, such as tree houses and wooden boats, are scattered throughout the forest and garden-like landscapes, blending nature with artificial creations. Through this fusion of "nature" and "artificiality," the artist re-examines the complex relationship between people and plants in modern urban settings.

Kotaro Nukaga Gallery (2021) notes that the artist's philosophy is rooted in ecology, advocating for nature to be seen as an equal rather than as something to be explored and conquered. This perspective highlights the need to reconsider human-centered attitudes towards nature.

#### *The Studio Investigation*

The project seeks to investigate contemporary Chinese gardens through a survey of gardens with spring and summer as the main seasons. It investigates the forms of creation of harmonious environments in contemporary Chinese gardens, reflecting symbolic features in contemporary gardens. The research project uses photographs of contemporary Chinese gardens in spring and summer as the main reference material for the investigation. The

photographs were collected during the field trip, in addition to images obtained from printed materials like promotional brochures, books, magazines, and online sources.

### Contemporary Spring Garden



Figure 4. Spring plants and buildings

Figure 4 depicts the architectural and botanical composition of Gongqing Forest Park in Shanghai. Zhang (2018) noted that traditional Chinese gardens emphasize the concept of harmony, which represents the seamless integration of garden elements with their surrounding environment. The garden architecture consists of natural elements with significant evolutionary value, and the overall artistic essence of the garden is shaped by the harmonious interaction of these elements, each complementing the others (Fu, 2019). Williams (2023) explained that Chinese gardens incorporate both regular and irregular elements, with irregular rocks, plants, and ponds representing "yin," while regular buildings and pavilions symbolize "yang." The interplay of yin and yang creates a complementary balance within the garden. This harmony between the spring plants and the built environment is also evident in the aesthetics of plant colours, with spring plants primarily featuring green and red hues. Colours, being the most immediate and perceptible aspect of plant landscape appreciation, evoke distinct psychological responses from viewers based on their perceptions of the landscape's colours.



A B C D E

Figure 5. Spring plants of ecological value

The ecological value of plants creates a harmonious natural environment in contemporary gardens. Picture A shows willow trees in Gongqing Forest Park in Shanghai, where the willow symbolizes the yin force of the earth, reaching toward the heavens and serving as a connection between the yin and yang forces of nature (Li, 2017). The beauty and overall form of the willow tree embody the yin nature and force, while some trees may display either yin-yang or purely yang characteristics. The willow's charm and flexibility suggest a balance between "yin and yang" (Zhong, 2014).

Picture B showcases azaleas in Fudeli Park in Shanghai, which bloom in spring to help purify harmful substances, support the growth of evergreen plants, and enhance the park's water

and air quality. Ding (2019) highlights that urban air pollution poses a threat to human health and productivity, and that urban trees can act as barriers to absorb airborne particulate matter. The bark and leaves of willows, for example, absorb harmful substances like sulfur dioxide and convert them into harmless compounds, thereby reducing pollutant concentrations. Pictures C, D, and E illustrate the design of spring flower borders in Gongqing Forest Park in Shanghai and People's Park in Shenzhen. These flower borders are designed with ecological balance in mind, enhancing plant arrangements based on the growth patterns of wildflowers to maintain ecological integrity. Increasing plant species enriches the community structure and adds variety in colour and form, attracting animals to inhabit the area and promoting positive ecological effects (Morckel, 2015).

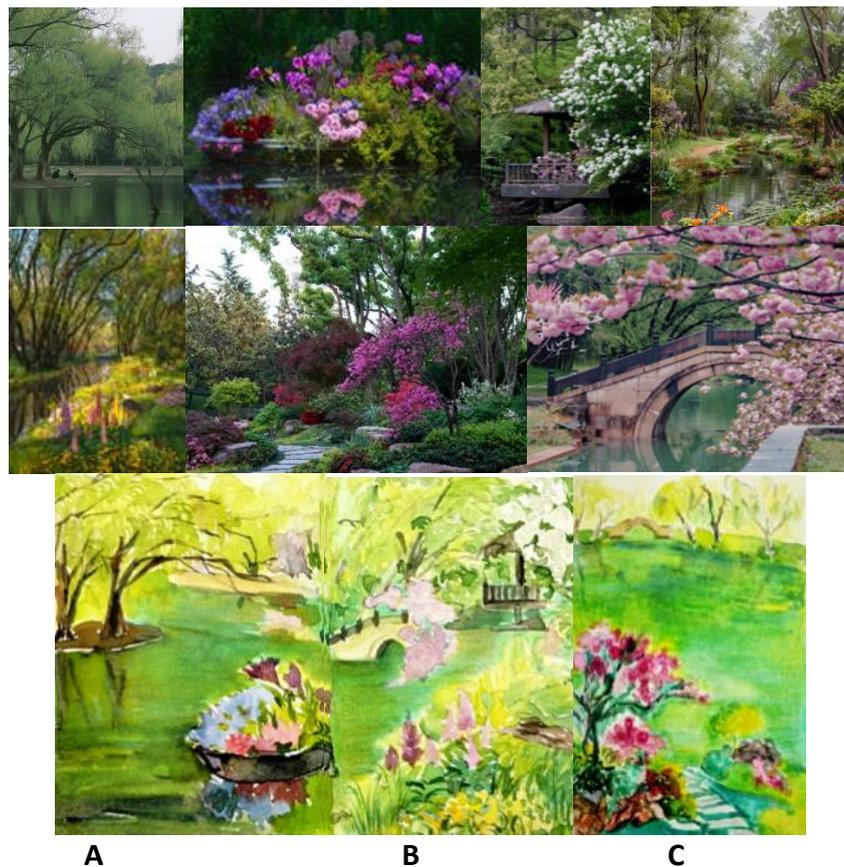


Figure 6. Sketch composition stage

Figure 6 illustrates the stage of sketch composition, incorporating real-life investigation images, with architecture and plants as the central elements of the garden. The spring colors are represented through color sketches. The three works are presented as a series, demonstrating coherence and richness in both content and form, with red and green as the dominant colors, symbolizing the contrasting relationship between yin and yang in terms of color. As Zhu (1998) states in the *I Ching*, the fundamental elements that constitute the world are not pure elements but a blend of yin and yang. These opposing principles of nature are interconnected and complementary. Everything in the world possesses both yin and yang characteristics, which represent the essence of the universe.

Picture A features flower boats and tender green willows, creating a sharp contrast with the surrounding green, enriching the visual space with more than just a single color. Hoyle (2017) argues that the vibrant floral colors briefly heighten the aesthetic experience, while the green

vegetation background promotes psychological restoration. The flower border plants in Picture B are arranged in varying heights to showcase biodiversity, adhering to the principle of harmonious proportion. The integration of architecture and plants softens artificial traces and embodies the concept of yin and yang harmony and the unity of humanity and nature. In Picture C, the azalea, a common plant in ecological gardens, purifies the air, while the distant bridge serves as a decorative feature, creating a rhythmic visual echo throughout the image.



Figure 7. Sketch modification advanced stage

Figure 7 represents the advanced stage of sketch refinement, focusing on close-up and mid-range views that unify the visual direction and emphasize the spatial composition. The foreground plants are designed to highlight biodiversity and reflect the natural essence of contemporary gardens, aiming for the unity of heaven and man. The integration of architecture and plants exemplifies the Taoist concept of yin and yang harmony. The foreground subtly frames the central view, enriching the water space, while the tree branches symbolize the seasonal transition from winter to spring. Salsedo (2008, p. 21) notes that as winter fades and warmer days extend, dormant trees and plants begin to sprout, signaling the revival of life in spring. Rhododendrons are placed in a natural setting, enhancing the garden's resemblance to a natural environment and emphasizing the importance of preserving and maintaining the natural world. Pang (2012) argues that green infrastructure is vital to the city, helping maintain the balance of the urban ecosystem, improve environmental quality, and enhance living conditions for its residents.



Figure 8. Spring Garden, Oil on canvas, 2024, 120x60cm each

Figure 8 showcases the final paintings, inspired by real-life spring scenes from contemporary Chinese gardens, capturing the vibrant and biologically diverse atmosphere of these spaces. The three paintings are composed from foreground to background, guiding the viewer

through the distinct features of a spring garden. The dominant colours, soft green and pink, are represented by the willow and plants like azaleas and early cherry blossoms, creating a harmonious contrast. Li (2006) explains that the principles of contrast and harmony guide the selection of plant species, which are integrated with the water features to form a distinctive garden landscape. The flower borders and flower boats in the foreground symbolize biodiversity, reflecting the rich and diverse biological characteristics of spring plants while embodying ecological harmony. Zhong (2014) observes that in nature, plants undergo a wide range of colour changes, and with the arrival of spring, a variety of blooming plants create a vibrant and stunning landscape effect.

Willow azaleas are commonly found in spring gardens, valued for their environmental and ecological benefits. Positioned in the central landscape, they symbolize ecological harmony, contributing to a natural environment that aligns with the Taoist concept of everything returning to nature and achieving balance (Qi, 2023). According to Chen (2020), designers select tree species based on the site's specific conditions and ecological balance to create a stable and diverse plant community. Chinese garden forests have long maintained a close relationship with nature, striving to replicate the most beautiful natural landscapes. Through engagement with nature, individuals can escape everyday concerns and experience inner harmony (Święcki, 2014). This work portrays spring gardens through paintings, presenting real spaces while highlighting the harmonious beauty of the natural environment, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the unique charm and symbolic harmony of spring gardens. Morckel (2015) notes that the degree of naturalness is a key measure of the aesthetic appeal of spring botanical landscapes. A natural design style not only provides visual relaxation and pleasure but also aids in protecting and restoring the ecological environment through scientific conservation management. The overall color scheme, plant combinations, and architectural layout of the work create a modern garden space.

#### Contemporary Summer Garden

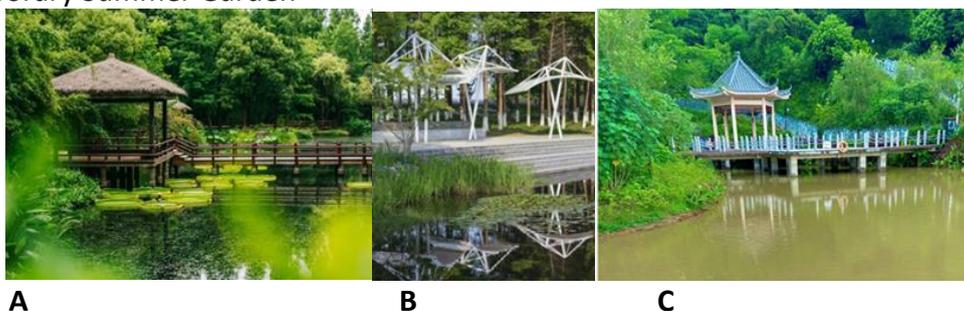


Figure 9. Summer garden buildings and plants

Summer, the hottest season of the year, requires careful attention in garden design to create cool, comfortable, and harmonious spaces. Architecture plays a crucial role in providing shade and relief from the summer heat. Figure 9 illustrates the integration of architecture and plants in contemporary Chinese gardens, with Pictures ABC showcasing the landscapes of Shanghai Binjiang Forest Park, Wuxi Dagangwan Child Friendly Wetland Park, and Qilongshan Soccer Park in Shenzhen. In each, the pavilion is the focal point, surrounded by plants strategically placed to provide shade for visitors during hot summer days. Landscape design is continuously refined to maintain the overall harmony of "nature-architecture-people," ensuring that viewing pavilions are often situated in scenic natural surroundings, allowing visitors to enjoy

the beauty of the landscape. Most pavilions feature open, elegant designs without external walls, enhancing the connection with nature.

The design of long bridges offers visitors the opportunity to approach the water closely. Water, a vital natural element, plays an essential role in cooling the environment during the hot summer months. Microclimate studies, such as those by Huang (2022), confirm that water bodies can effectively lower site temperatures. The incorporation of water in landscape design reflects the Taoist concept of "unity of heaven and mankind," promoting the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature (You, 2019).

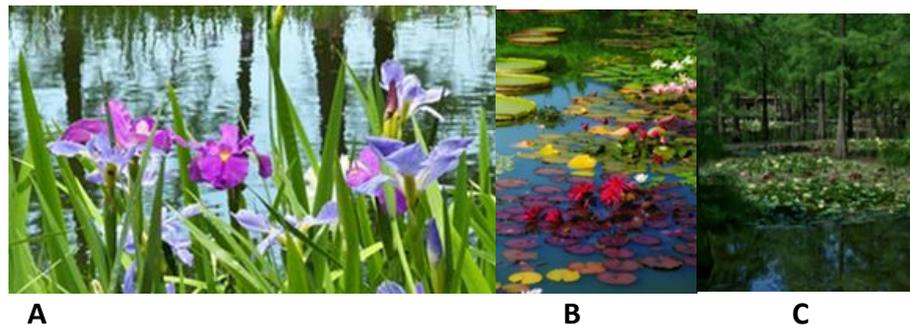
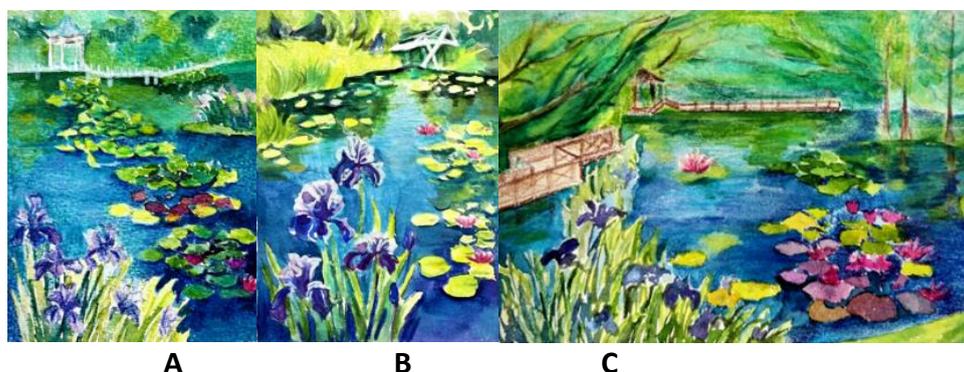
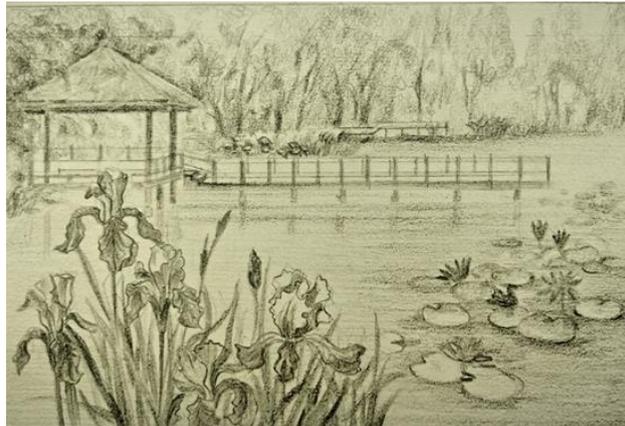


Figure 10 Summer garden species of ecological value

Figure 10 shows the ecological plants commonly found in summer gardens. Pictures A, B, and C feature, respectively, irises at Yangchun Lake Park in Wuhan, water lilies at the National Botanical Gardens, and lotus flowers at Egret Bay Wetland Park in Chengdu, all captured during the summer. These plants are frequently found in summer garden settings. Jafari (2024) notes that the lotus flower represents a harmonious balance of yin and yang in Taoism, with its roots submerged in water and its blossoms reaching toward the sky. It embodies both yin and yang qualities and symbolizes purity and light. Water lilies, often found in contemporary gardens, help purify water (Thomaz, 2023). Irises, common in water gardens, are vital aquatic plants that contribute to the vitality of wetland ecosystems and help stabilize ecological balance (Wang, 2014). The design of ecological wetland parks must account for the ecological roles of aquatic plants, replicate wetland ecosystems, and establish diverse plant communities. Research shows that scientifically designed aquatic plant communities enhance water purification and are ideal for ecological wetland park development (Lin, 2018).





D

Figure 11. Sketch refinement stage

Figure 11 depicts the refinement stage of the sketch, using colour and form to represent the tones of a summer garden. In this composition, irises are placed in the foreground, water lilies in the mid-ground, and a combination of a pavilion and a long bridge in the far-ground. The pavilion provides shade from the summer heat, while the long bridge brings people closer to the water, emphasizing its practical role in enhancing the summer experience. Creating a sense of coolness is crucial in summer garden design. Pictures A, B, and C represent the stages of the experiment, where the sense of plant space is conveyed through sketches, with the focus on optimizing visual appeal during this phase. Figure D represents the final refined sketch, based on previous experiments, emphasizing the relationship between near and far elements. It streamlines the materials and carefully selects plants for each level. The irises in the foreground serve as the visual anchor, with water lilies flanking them on either side, maintaining focus on the natural state of the plants. The water lilies extend toward the distance, intersecting with the walking corridor in the middle view. The plant choices reflect the ecological and environmental characteristics of summer flora, while the pavilion and long bridge are seamlessly integrated into the environment. Zhou (1996) states that the walking corridor, which adapts to the contours of the land, acts as a link between the garden architecture and natural elements. The pavilions are compact in size, diverse in form, open to the view, and harmoniously blended with the natural landscape.



Figure 12. Summer garden, Oil on canvas, 2024, 180x120cm

The artwork depicts a summer garden with blue tones, evoking a sense of tranquility and coolness. The pond, surrounded by irises, water lilies, and plant reflections, flows outward

from the center, symbolizing the harmony of yin and yang in traditional Chinese aesthetics. According to Li (2006), for large ponds, it's ideal to create distinct planting blocks while leaving other areas open to reflect the view from the shore. The selection of plant species was guided by the principles of contrast and harmony, aligning with the water formations to create a unique garden landscape.

The entire summer garden is designed to showcase a harmonious spatial environment, blending architecture with plants. Each plant and flower plays a vital role in maintaining ecological balance. Chen (2007, p. 24) notes that while summer is often associated with heat, it is also the season when plants reach their most vigorous growth stage. The vibrant, blooming flowers, rich shade, and green canopy bring a sense of coolness to the season. The dominant theme in this garden is the reconciliation and harmony between humans and nature, echoing the core principles of "unity of man with nature" (Chen, 2009). This work offers an aesthetic experience through the design of the summer garden space and the use of color, with visual elements as the primary form. As Liu (2017, p. 219) suggests, through the aesthetic blending of subject and object, the unity of man and nature becomes achievable. The unity of heaven and man involves merging with nature through a calm, serene, and empty state of mind, reaching a state of selflessness and oneness, and ultimately achieving inner peace and spiritual fulfillment.

### **Conclusion**

This research project examines the specific expressions of harmony symbolism in contemporary Chinese gardens through paintings inspired by photographs of real gardens in spring and summer. It incorporates multi-perspective compositional studies to design new garden spaces that provoke reflections on the symbolic meanings of contemporary Chinese gardens. This project explores the impact of the unity of heaven and mankind theory on Chinese garden design, emphasizing its philosophy and contemporary relevance in creating harmonious garden environments. It establishes a connection between public gardens and their cultural connotations, allowing for a more intuitive philosophical experience. Through a studio practice approach and oil paintings, the research creatively visualizes the cultural and symbolic meanings of plant landscaping, offering fresh perspectives on interpreting traditional garden aesthetics in modern contexts. As a result, this study enhances the understanding of Chinese garden symbolism, promotes sustainable design approaches, and enriches the discourse on the intersection of nature, culture, and art in contemporary landscape architecture.

Beyond highlighting the importance of natural and harmonious garden spaces, this project also delves into their aesthetic significance. Through artistic expression, the works encourage a deeper relationship between humans and nature, providing insights that could inspire future landscape architects and designers to integrate traditional aesthetics with modern ecological principles. This, in turn, ensures the continuity of Chinese cultural heritage in urban green spaces and offers new ideas and inspiration for contemporary garden design.

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