

Visualising the Winter Landscapes and Environmental Sensibility in Contemporary Chinese Gardens through Painting

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Abstracts

This study focuses on the interplay between aesthetics and landscape design. Grounded in the philosophical principle of "the unity of heaven and humanity", this study explores the harmonious characteristics of winter gardens in contemporary Chinese landscape architecture through oil painting practice. Adopting an integrated theory–practice framework, oil painting is used to explore the connections between ecological function and aesthetic expression in winter gardens. Garden-related works by Deng Guoyuan, Damien Hirst, and Nicola Moss are examined as case studies to demonstrate different forms of harmonious manifestations in garden spaces. Findings indicate that, through innovative plant configurations and spatial organisation, winter gardens achieve tripartite harmony: philosophical expression of yin-yang balance through botanical and architectural design; ecological synergy between evergreens and litter layers, providing comprehensive ecosystem services; and aesthetic immersion through scroll formats, capturing winter's distinctive tranquilly. This research positions winter gardens as exemplary integrations of traditional wisdom and modern design, perpetuating Chinese garden aesthetics while offering unique approaches to sustainable urban development. Ultimately, it provides valuable references for localised paradigms in ecological aesthetics and landscape design.

Keywords: Winter Garden, Unity of Heaven And Humanity, Contemporary Chinese Gardens, Harmony, Painting, Sustainable Design

Introduction

Chinese garden art serves as a tangible expression of the philosophical principle of "unity between heaven and humanity," with the core concept of "harmony" rooted in traditional yin-yang cosmology. This art form embodies the dialectical wisdom of the unity of opposites (He, 2006). Against the backdrop of concurrent advancements in modern urban development and ecological restoration, garden design is undergoing a significant paradigm shift from traditional aesthetics toward ecological functionality (Heymans, 2019). The pressing need to reconcile deep cultural heritage with contemporary sustainability goals underscores the

importance of this research area. A critical gap persists in both academic inquiry and practical application: how to effectively translate enduring philosophical principles into clear, functional, and ecologically impactful modern design strategies.

Winter gardens, as quintessential seasonal landscapes, provide an ideal focal point for this investigation, bridging traditional wisdom with contemporary ecological values. They demonstrate life-cycle integrity, tranquil qualities, and ecological resilience, thereby offering a concrete platform to address the aforementioned gap. Winter gardens creatively reflect on plant phenology as a means of modernizing traditional wisdom, transforming abstract concepts like "the interplay of emptiness and substance" into actionable ecological design language. For example, the winter forms of native plant branches and persistent fruits provide a contemporary interpretation of the traditional 'aesthetics of decay' (Chen, 2012), while simultaneously delivering measurable ecological benefits and facilitating a modern evolution of aesthetic ideals.



Figure 1 The persimmon trees in Beijing's Jingshan Park

At the intersection of ecology and culture, winter gardens create a multi-dimensional harmonious system. Evergreen plants and litter layers facilitate a visual dialogue across the seasons while extending the concept of 'yin-yang balance' into tangible ecosystem services, such as air purification and habitat provision (Tyrväinen, 2005). Landscape structures that uphold traditional spatial aesthetics transition from formal beauty to a human-centred ethic of care by providing winter shelter and viewing perspectives (Zhang, 2011). This methodology fosters a vital connection between cultural continuity and ecological utility.



Figure 2 The multi-dimensional harmonious winter scenery within Xi'an Fengqing Park

The significance of this study lies in its direct utility for multiple stakeholders. For urban planners, landscape architects, and ecological restoration practitioners, it offers a validated framework for designing spaces that are both culturally resonant and ecologically effective. For communities, it enhances urban livability by providing multifunctional winter landscapes

that support well-being, biodiversity, and cultural identity. For the academic field, it addresses a critical need by demonstrating how theoretical philosophical constructs can be operationalized into design principles with verifiable outcomes.

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, melding theoretical inquiry with artistic practice to systematically explore how contemporary Chinese winter gardens establish a novel paradigm of harmony. It will illustrate that the harmonious attributes of winter gardens represent a distinctive, historically-grounded integration—encompassing both an ecological interpretation of Yin-Yang philosophy and a synergistic model for cultural and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, it aspires to transform static aesthetics into dynamic, interactive experiences that serve contemporary needs. By analysing this fusion paradigm, the study aims to establish a practical modern garden design framework, thereby promoting a sustainable development trajectory enriched with unique Chinese elements.

Project Outline

This study adopts a research approach that integrates theoretical construction with studio practice, employing oil painting as the expressive medium to systematically investigate the harmonious environmental characteristics of contemporary Chinese winter gardens. The specific methodology is structured as follows:

- Grounded in the concepts of the unity of heaven and humanity (tian ren he yi) and in–yang harmony, this study examines how traditional philosophical principles are translated into contemporary winter garden design. It analyses the ways in which the calm, restrained, and contemplative qualities of winter landscapes are reinterpreted through modern artistic and spatial design languages.
- Explores plant configuration strategies during the winter dormant season, focusing on how design decisions enhance ecological resilience. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between ecological function and Eastern aesthetic values, demonstrating how planting structures can simultaneously support environmental sustainability and expressive landscape character.

Related Theoretical Ideas

"The unity of heaven and humanity," a fundamental principle of traditional Chinese culture, serves not only as the spiritual foundation of Chinese civilisation but also offers essential theoretical support for the contemporary construction of ecological civilisation (Zhou, 2024). This philosophy highlights the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, advocating respect for natural laws and harmonious coexistence with all life forms. Philosophically, this concept encompasses not only social scientific implications but also profound wisdom in natural philosophy (Guo, 2018). Laozi's doctrine of "Dao following nature" specifically underscores the necessity for humanity to align with cosmic operational principles, thereby harmonising human behaviour with the natural order to ultimately realise a unified existence between heaven and humanity (Lee, 2003).

Within the philosophical framework of "the unity of heaven and humanity", yin-yang harmony serves as a crucial theoretical dimension. The concept of yin and yang suggests that all phenomena in the universe are made up of these two complementary yet opposing forces. As an integral aspect of nature, human activities ought to align with the principle of yin-yang balance to foster coordinated development between humanity and the environment (Lee,

2003). Guo (2018) further observes that this ecological consciousness of "heaven-human harmony" embodies a profound perspective on nature and life that is rooted in traditional Chinese culture, thereby offering valuable intellectual resources for contemporary environmental ethics.

Within the framework of contemporary environmental philosophy and design practice, the concept of "the unity of heaven and humanity" advocates for establishing relationships of equality and respect between humans and nature. It calls for reverence for the natural world, environmental protection, and a commitment to sustainable development (Xu, 2024). In the realm of garden design, this philosophy does not suggest a regression to a primitive state of nature; rather, it promotes a dialectical design approach that respects natural ecological processes while incorporating artificial elements to address social, economic, and cultural development needs (Chen, 2009; Guo, 2018). For example, designs should emphasise the continuity of natural vegetation and create plant landscapes that fulfil ecological requirements, thereby achieving an organic integration of natural and artificial environments (Chen, 2020).

This spiritual perspective, which seeks to reconnect human culture with natural forces and views cities and landscapes as interconnected organic systems (Jakupi, 2016), not only perpetuates traditional Chinese ecological wisdom but also transforms the notion of "the unity of heaven and humanity" from "conquering nature" to practical strategies for "adapting to nature and utilising it rationally." This shift offers crucial insights for attaining harmonious development and ecological balance in contemporary urban environments.

Related Art Practices



Figure 3 Deng Guoyuan, *In the Garden No. 9*, Ink on paper, 122 x 122 cm, 2004

In "In the Garden No. 9," Deng Guoyuan employs the dry-wet techniques of ink washing and ink blending to create an artistic conception characterised by void and ambiguity. While his style evokes associations with Impressionism, its essence is firmly rooted in Eastern philosophy. For Deng, a garden transcends being merely a microcosm of nature; it also embodies a product of human intervention and reconstruction. His works engage the dialectical relationship between natural creation and artificial conception, emphasising the boundaries that separate them. As noted by critic Betty (2015), Chinese gardens exemplify the fundamental connection between humans and nature. Deng's "In the Garden" series intentionally highlights the presence of the "human" element within the artwork, underscoring the interaction between the viewer and the image. The garden serves not only

as an object of admiration but also as a habitable space, symbolising the intrinsic desire of modern individuals to reconnect with nature. His artistic practice offers significant inspiration for this paper's exploration of the dialectical relationship between nature and artifice through the medium of oil painting.



Figure 4 Damien Hirst, Hidden Gardens, Oil on canvas, 62.3 x 45 cm, 2023

In the composition, garden flowers are rendered with swift yet distinctly discernible brushstrokes, overlaid with thick, vibrantly hued splashes of pigment. Hirst describes this visual tension as "like pollen, or some kind of assault on the senses." Within this lush, blossoming tableau, the interplay between humanity and the environment emerges as a central theme. As noted by Westall (2023), Hirst skilfully merges elements of human design with natural features and concepts of order with traces of chaos. His "Secret" series fundamentally examines the interaction between humans and their environment, poignantly illustrating both the attempt to dominate nature and its intrinsic futility (Bellos, 2024). The canvases themselves become arenas embodying this complex relationship, and the tension between order and chaos therein offers a dialectical perspective for considering the balance between "human artistry" and "natural force" in winter gardens.



Figure 5 Nicola Moss, Green Makes Me Happy II, Acrylic and paper on linen, 71 x 171 cm, 2021

Moss's Green Makes Me Happy II continues her exploration of green spaces, synthesising observations from Tokyo's Zen gardens, Italy's botanical gardens, and private gardens along the Gold Coast. Through her use of painting and collage techniques, she creates an immersive rhythm of plant growth that transports viewers directly into the garden setting. The work masterfully combines the openness of public gardens with the intimacy of private spaces, establishing subtle connections between immediate perception and enduring memory

through the visual interplay of foreground and background. As Walsh (2024) notes, Moss's art shows real human feelings and physical reactions to green spaces while also looking at environmental sustainability and "sustainism." Moss imagines a world that has been changed by harmony, connection, and symbiosis. Her concept of ecological equality and her visual narrative approach provide essential support for this paper's argument regarding the integration of "ecological harmony" with "visual harmony."

The Studio Investigation

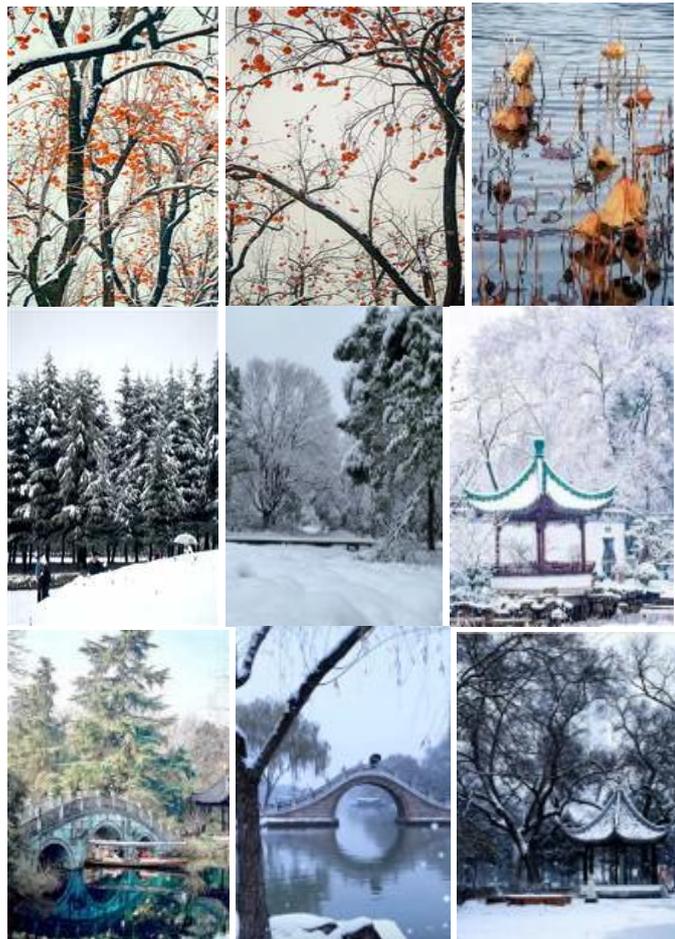


Figure 6 Winter Garden: Plants, Architecture, and Ecological Harmony

The studio practice engaged in three rounds of progressive sketch exploration, centring on the core objective of "visual-ecological" harmony. Through visual analysis of representative cases from both northern and southern China (Figure 6), it was found that successful winter landscapes generally adhere to two key design principles. Architectural structures (yang) and elements like plant forms and water reflections (yin) visually establish a unity between opposites (Liang, 2024). Functionally, they rely on specific plants to maintain both ecological and visual vitality. The pine tree, as an evergreen species, serves not only as a colour anchor in winter but also becomes a core component of the urban forest system due to its air purification capabilities and the micro-ecosystem formed when clustered (Tyrväinen, 2005). Conversely, the withered lotus, despite its form, acts as a crucial component of the aquatic ecosystem. Through the decomposition of its remnants, it facilitates material cycling,

embodying what can be termed the "aesthetics of ecological succession" within the life cycle (Chen, 2012).



Figure 7 First sketch composition

Based on these findings, a design philosophy centred around "visual yin-yang harmony" and "sustainable ecological functionality" was established. The initial sketches (Figure7) used the Moon Bridge and pavilion as architectural anchors to achieve a fundamental balance in both spatial and visual elements. Through the meticulous arrangement of tree branches and their shadows, the composition established multiple correspondences between left and right, as well as solid and void. The design drew on Yastrebova's (2013) research concerning winter shadows, employing elongated shadows to create dramatic effects. However, the underdeveloped characteristics of the winter landscape and a weak ecological narrative limited this version, despite the clear compositional relationships demonstrated.





Figure 8 Second sketch composition

This sketch represents the second draft experiment, aiming to visually integrate architecture with a snowy woodland landscape. In the foreground, the contrast between straight trunks and curved branches creates a dynamic interplay of yin and yang through line and form. The middle ground connects man-made structures, such as a bridge and pavilion, with natural scenery, while the distant trees evoke the ecological presence of an urban forest. Through its rhythmic balance of solid and void, along with the carefully rendered twists and spacing of branches, the composition captures the quiet aesthetic of a winter garden. It also reflects Tyrväinen's (2005) principle of balancing aesthetic and ecological values in urban forestry. Although progress has been made in extending the ecological dimension, the overall integration among elements could be further refined.





Figure 9 Final composition sketch

In the final proposal sketch (Figure 9), an organic integration of aesthetic form and ecological significance has been achieved. The composition draws inspiration from the narrative layout of traditional Chinese hand scrolls, employing the guiding lines of a foreground persimmon tree to organise the visual flow—an illustration of the Eastern aesthetic principle that "line precedes form" (Jafari, 2023). The natural incorporation of withering lotus clusters set against a pine forest backdrop embodies the fundamental philosophical pursuit of balance and harmony found in yin-yang theory (Abbas, 2024). The final design not only demonstrates visual harmony between architecture and vegetation, as well as between lines and space, but also proposes a self-sustaining winter garden paradigm, characterised by the air-purifying qualities of pines and the material cycling of withered lotus. This holistic design approach aligns with contemporary interpretations of yin-yang philosophy in the context of environmental ethics and sustainable development, as articulated by Abbas (2024).



Figure 10 Winter Garden, Oil on canvas, 160 x 80 cm each, 2023

The artwork is conceived around a winter snowscape and presents a garden environment that appears crystalline in atmosphere yet subtly animated by underlying life. The snow-covered setting establishes a sense of stillness and restraint, while the careful organisation of natural and architectural elements suggests continuity and renewal beneath the surface calm. This tension between quietness and vitality forms the conceptual foundation of the composition. In the foreground, the persimmon tree is rendered through a realist approach that emphasises structural clarity and material presence. Variations in light and shadow along the branches produce a rhythmic interplay between brightness and darkness, giving the dormant wood a sense of depth and movement. The curvature and directional flow of the branch lines guide the viewer's gaze across the surface of the painting, visually articulating the philosophical notion of yin–yang transformation, where opposing forces coexist and continuously shift in relation to one another (Li, 2016). Rather than depicting dormancy as lifelessness, the treatment of the tree highlights resilience and latent energy.

In the middle ground, the Moon Bridge and its reflection in the water form a complete and balanced visual unit. The solid structure of the bridge is echoed by its inverted image, creating a dialogue between presence and absence, substance and emptiness. This relationship embodies the traditional Chinese aesthetic understanding of void and solid as mutually dependent rather than oppositional. The circular continuity suggested by the bridge and its reflection reinforces the harmony of yin and yang, while also introducing a meditative rhythm into the spatial composition (Salah, 2022).

On the left side of the scene, the pavilion functions as both a compositional anchor and a symbolic space of encounter. Architecturally integrated into the landscape, it provides a vantage point that invites contemplation and observation. Its placement underscores the

reciprocal relationship between human presence and the natural environment, suggesting coexistence rather than dominance. The pavilion thus operates as a mediator between the viewer and the garden space, echoing long-standing principles in Chinese garden design that emphasise experiential engagement and reflection (Keswick, 2003).

The juxtaposition of withered lotus plants and evergreen pine trees further deepens the thematic and ecological layers of the work. The lotus, shown in decay, evokes an appreciation for impermanence and cyclical regeneration, reminding the viewer that decline is an essential stage within natural continuity. In contrast, the pine tree, with its enduring foliage, introduces a visual and symbolic counterpoint, representing endurance and continuity through the winter season. Together, these plant forms establish a dialogue between transience and persistence, while also reflecting ecological relationships that support seasonal balance.

In the background, a distant grove is depicted using atmospheric perspective, where details gradually dissolve into soft haze. This treatment expands the spatial depth of the garden, allowing the scene to extend beyond the immediate frame into an open, contemplative distance. The gradual loss of clarity enhances the sense of quiet expansiveness and reinforces the meditative quality of the winter landscape.

By synthesising key visual elements of winter gardens—branch structures, evergreen tones, layered spatial transitions, and subtle architectural presence (Rosemary, 2002), the composition achieves a restrained yet expressive harmony. The overall effect conveys the distinctive tranquillity of winter while simultaneously revealing an undercurrent of life and continuity. Through this careful orchestration of form, space, and symbolism, the artwork communicates winter not as an end point, but as a moment of pause within an ongoing ecological and philosophical cycle.

Conclusion

Through an integrated examination of theory and studio practice, this study demonstrates that winter gardens serve as important mediators between traditional Chinese garden art and contemporary ecological thinking. The formation of their harmonious qualities reflects an innovative synthesis grounded in cultural heritage. The findings show that classical philosophical principles—particularly the concept of the unity of heaven and humanity and the dynamic balance of yin and yang—continue to hold aesthetic significance in modern winter garden design while also enabling broader ecological functions. Their application extends beyond symbolic meaning to influence spatial organisation, planting logic, and environmental performance.

The studio component develops a winter garden framework that brings together visual aesthetics and ecological function through three phases of iterative sketch exploration. The final outcome, presented in the form of a diptych handscroll, translates philosophical ideas into tangible spatial experiences through carefully articulated design strategies. These include the expression of yin–yang transformation through the rhythmic alignment of persimmon trees, the interplay of emptiness and solidity revealed in the reflected image of the Moon Bridge, and the continuity of ecological cycles symbolised by the juxtaposition of withered lotus plants and evergreen pines. Such translations are evident not only in planting arrangements that highlight ecological succession and seasonal resilience, but also in architectural elements that support human comfort, reflection, and well-being.

The study identifies a threefold mechanism underlying the construction of harmony in winter gardens. First, it functions as a cultural translation process, transforming traditional aesthetic values into a contemporary ecological design language. Second, it operates as a platform for ecosystem services, where intentional plant configurations generate synergies between visual qualities and ecological performance, including habitat support and seasonal adaptability. Third, it represents a shift from static visual appreciation to dynamic spatial engagement, encouraging meaningful interaction between people and the natural environment. Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate the impact of winter garden design in sustaining cultural continuity, enhancing ecological awareness, and improving the experiential quality of urban spaces. As such, the study proposes a developmental pathway for contemporary Chinese garden design that integrates cultural wisdom with ecological thinking, while contributing locally informed perspectives to global discussions on sustainable landscape design.

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