

Literary Writing and Spatial Construction of Gardens in Qing Dynasty Opera

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Abstract: The Qing Dynasty was the golden age of the development of Chinese opera and the maturation of garden culture. As core carriers of Qing culture, opera and gardens formed a profound symbiotic relationship at both material and spiritual levels—gardens provided natural performance spaces and aesthetic inspiration for opera, while opera enriched gardens with narrative connotations and cultural metaphors through literary writing. This study, with "literary writing" and "spatial construction" as dual cores, combines Lefebvre's theory of "spatial production," Foucault's theory of "heterotopia," and China's traditional spatial aesthetics. Using interdisciplinary methods such as textual analysis, cultural history verification, and comparative literature research, it systematically analyzes the typological characteristics, spatial construction logic, and cultural connotations of garden writing in Qing opera. The study finds that garden writing in Qing opera exhibits three major types: lyrical, narrative, and symbolic. Its spatial construction encompasses the aesthetic reconstruction of physical space, emotional attachment to spiritual space, and hierarchical representation of social space. Essentially, it is a multifaceted fusion of Confucian ethical order, Taoist pursuit of nature, and urban cultural tastes, serving as a cultural mirror of Qing social transformation.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty opera; garden writing; spatial construction; cultural metaphor; aesthetic paradigm

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The cross-boundary integration of Qing Dynasty opera and gardens has formed a unique artistic landscape in China's traditional culture. As "three-dimensional poetry and silent paintings," gardens naturally align with the narrative logic and emotional expression of opera in terms of spatial layout and aesthetic conception. Meanwhile, opera transforms the material form of gardens into literary imagery through lyrics, dialogue, and plot arrangement, making gardens cultural spaces that carry social memory, emotional experiences, and value pursuits. In the contemporary context, cultural heritage protection faces the important proposition of "living inheritance." As core representatives of intangible and tangible cultural heritage, the intrinsic symbiotic relationship and integration logic between opera and gardens provide important insights for the holistic protection of contemporary cultural heritage.

1. Interaction between Garden and External Social Space

Gardens and external social spaces are both interconnected and isolated. As physical spaces, gardens connect with urban and rural environments while forming boundaries through walls and gates, creating relatively enclosed independent spaces.

Gardens embody multifaceted contradictions across space and time. In traditional Chinese opera, they serve as living spaces that merge reality with dreams and memories, bridging the present with history and the future. This layered temporal and spatial complexity transforms gardens into paradoxical entities, creating rich narrative possibilities. Take the Back Garden in *The Peony Pavilion* as an example: it functions as Du Liniang's physical garden in reality, her dream realm where she meets Liu Mengmei, and the netherworld where her spirit resides after death. This interplay of dimensions makes gardens bridges between reality and illusion, life and death, driving plot development. Furthermore, gardens possess mechanisms of opening and closing. Elements like gates and paths provide access while restricting movement, creating selective spaces where different social classes and purposes can enter distinct areas. For instance, imperial gardens are exclusive to royalty, officials, and select guests, while private gardens welcome literati and scholars, becoming venues for literary gatherings. In opera, these spatial mechanisms often intertwine with plot conflicts—characters might scale walls or enter through back doors to achieve encounters or elopements, symbolizing breakthroughs beyond spatial constraints. Gardens reflect societal structures while simultaneously opposing them. As a microcosm of social space, gardens reflect the hierarchical system, ethical order,

and aesthetic tastes of the Qing Dynasty. Yet through their enclosed and free nature, they also stand in opposition to the oppressive hierarchy and Confucian constraints of the external society, becoming a space for resisting social norms.

China's traditional spatial aesthetics centers on the core concepts of "harmony between heaven and humanity" and "the interplay of the real and the void." "Harmony between heaven and humanity" is the central idea of China's traditional spatial aesthetics, derived from the Taoist concept of "the Dao follows nature," emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. In the art of garden design, "harmony between heaven and humanity" manifests as garden layouts that conform to and imitate nature, using elements such as rocks, streams, and flowers to recreate the poetic imagery of natural landscapes, making gardens "though man-made, appear as if created by nature." For example, Jiangnan gardens often adopt the layout of "one pond and three mountains," mimicking the poetic imagery of immortal mountains at sea, reflecting reverence and longing for nature. The flowers and trees in gardens are mostly selected from local species, adapting to climatic and geographical conditions to achieve harmony with nature. In Qing Dynasty operas, garden descriptions also embody the aesthetic concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity." The depictions of natural landscapes in lyrics and dialogues often emphasize the integration of gardens with nature, such as "mountains encircling water," "lush flowers and trees," and "bird songs and floral fragrances," creating a fresh and natural aesthetic atmosphere. At the same time, the activities of characters in gardens are often related to nature, such as enjoying scenery, drinking wine, playing the zither, and composing poetry, reflecting the interaction and harmony between humans and nature. For example, in "The Palace of Eternal Life: Hearing Music," the description of the Moon Palace garden reads: "A clear light, jade towers and palaces, towering ten thousand feet high." Through the imagination and exaggeration of natural landscapes, it creates an ethereal and mystical fairyland atmosphere, embodying the aesthetic pursuit of "harmony between heaven and humanity." In the art of garden design, the concept of "interplay between void and substance" manifests through the harmonious integration of spatial voids and solid elements. The "void" encompasses water surfaces, open sky, and lattice windows, while the "solid" includes rock formations, architectural structures, and ornamental plants.

2.The Cultural Symbiosis between Opera and Garden

The symbiotic relationship between Qing Dynasty opera and garden culture manifests in two dimensions: material and spiritual. On the material level, gardens provide performance spaces and material foundations for opera, while opera enriches gardens with cultural ambiance and entertainment functions. On the spiritual level, the shared influence of literati's aesthetic tastes on both the literary portrayal of opera-gardens and garden design artistry creates a profound harmony in their aesthetic concepts and cultural connotations.

The construction of Qing Dynasty gardens and the development of traditional Chinese opera progressed in tandem, with gardens becoming vital performance venues and opera performances forming the core of garden cultural life. These two elements formed a symbiotic relationship at the material level. The widespread installation of opera stages in Qing gardens provided fixed performance spaces. Opera stages were built in imperial gardens, private gardens, and temple gardens, seamlessly integrated into garden layouts as essential components. Imperial gardens featured grand, ornate stages like the Dehe Garden Opera Stage in the Summer Palace and the Tongle Garden Opera Stage in the Old Summer Palace, capable of accommodating hundreds of spectators. These stages were primarily used for court celebrations and sacrificial ceremonies, featuring refined operas such as Kunqu and Peking Opera. Private gardens, on the other hand, had smaller, elegant stages like the Thirty-Six Mandarin Ducks Pavilion in Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden and the Forest Spring Pavilion in the Lingering Garden, serving as venues for literati gatherings and performances of Kunqu and local operas. The stage designs often harmonized with the garden's landscapes and flora, creating a natural and refreshing atmosphere. Temple gardens' opera stages were closely tied to religious activities, exemplified by those in Suzhou's Xiyuan Temple and Hangzhou's Lingyin Temple, where performances promoted moral virtues. These stages reflected the fusion of cultural and secular

traditions. The opera performances in Qing gardens were diverse, encompassing various performance styles and audience demographics. In imperial gardens, theatrical performances predominantly featured court operas staged by professional troupes, primarily for royal family members, officials, and foreign envoys. These productions often depicted historical narratives and mythological tales, blending political edification with entertainment. Private gardens, however, hosted impromptu performances during literati gatherings, where scholars either wrote and performed their own plays or invited folk troupes to present love stories and reclusive sentiments, emphasizing aesthetic appreciation and emotional expression. Temples and Taoist monasteries hosted public performances during religious festivals, featuring folk troupes that performed folk legends and moral teachings, catering to common people with accessible content and educational value.

3.The Literary Writing Types and Characteristics of Gardens in Qing Dynasty Operas

The profound integration of Qing Dynasty opera and garden culture transformed gardens into not merely physical settings for theatrical narratives, but also endowed them with multifaceted functions—lyricism, plot progression, and symbolism—through diverse literary expressions. Concurrently, the aesthetic characteristics of different garden types and the shifting cultural trends of the era shaped distinct typological features and period-specific styles in garden-themed writings. This section systematically analyzes the rich connotations and artistic qualities of garden depictions in Qing Dynasty operas from three dimensions: narrative function, garden typology, and historical evolution.

The core of narrative in opera lies in conveying thematic ideas through plot development and emotional expression. As an important carrier of narrative space, the literary writing of gardens often revolves around specific narrative functions, forming three major core types: lyrical, plot-driven, and symbolic. These three types do not exist in isolation but permeate and support each other, collectively constructing the multiple values of gardens in opera. Lyrical writing is one of the most aesthetically valuable types in Qing Dynasty opera garden writing, with its core feature being the deep binding of garden landscapes to the inner emotions of characters, making gardens an "externalized carrier" and "resonance space" of emotions. Through delicate depictions of garden elements, Qing Dynasty opera artists projected the joys and sorrows, partings and reunions of characters onto rocks, plants, pavilions, and streams, achieving the artistic effects of "expressing emotions through scenery" and "the fusion of emotion and scenery." This type of writing not only inherits the tradition of Chinese classical literature that "all scenery is language of emotion" but also combines the performance characteristics of opera, forming a unique lyrical paradigm. In love-themed operas, lyrical writing is particularly prominent, with gardens often becoming the core scenes where the protagonists' emotions awaken, love sprouts, and longing is expressed. Tang Xianzu's "The Peony Pavilion," though created in the Ming Dynasty, was widely circulated in the Qing Dynasty. Its two acts, "Garden Tour" and "Dream Startled," are exemplary of lyrical writing in their depiction of the back garden. Yet when she first stepped into this "forbidden place," the natural beauty of the garden instantly awakened her long-suppressed youthful emotions. The lyrics "Originally in full bloom, now all reduced to broken wells and crumbling walls" create a stark contrast between the garden's "prosperity" and "decay," depicting both the actual scene of the rear garden and metaphorically Du Liniang's suppressed youth—beautiful yet unappreciated, vibrant yet withering. The lament "What can be done with such fine weather? Where lies the joyous courtyard?" further merges the garden landscape with the character's loneliness, anguish, and yearning for freedom. The garden is no longer a mere natural space but becomes a "mirror" of Du Liniang's emotions. Her admiration for spring, regret over time, and longing for love are all subtly expressed through the garden's imagery. This lyrical expression avoids direct emotional outpouring, instead using the symbolic meaning of garden elements to convey feelings tactfully. Beyond love, the garden's lyrical portrayal encompasses various emotions like the pain of parting, homesickness, and reclusive aspirations. In Hong Sheng's **The Palace of Eternal Life**, the tragic love story between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei remains deeply intertwined with the imperial garden, particularly moving in the "Night Rain" scene. After the An Lushan

Rebellion, Emperor Xuanzong fled to Shu, and his dreams of Chang'an's imperial garden—where scenes like "sycamore trees in the night rain" and "willows startled by the wind" became emotional vessels for his longing for Yang Guifei. The lyrics "The Shu River's emerald waters and verdant mountains, the emperor's unrelenting devotion" contrast the eternal beauty of nature with the transient human condition. The imperial garden's former "flourishing blooms" now stand in stark contrast to "withered branches and fallen leaves," intensifying Emperor Xuanzong's remorse, longing, and solitude. The garden's transformation mirrors the emotional fluctuations of its inhabitants, making the expression profoundly moving. In reclusive-themed operas, the lyrical portrayal of gardens emphasizes scholars' weariness with officialdom and yearning for natural simplicity. In Kong Shangren's "The Peach Blossom Fan," when the "residual resonance" scene unfolds, literati like Liu Jingteng and Su Kunsheng retreat to Qixia Mountain. Confronted with "pine trees and wildflowers adorning the hills, while the city walls of Moling rise abruptly," they express nostalgia for their homeland and contentment with reclusive life. Elements like pines, bamboos, and plum blossoms symbolize scholars' moral integrity and reclusive ideals. The lines "wrecked fortresses left by defeated armies, withered horses lying in empty trenches" not only depict the garden's decay but also metaphorically convey the desolation of turbulent times, intertwining personal emotions with national fate to deepen the lyrical resonance. The lyrical artistry manifests in three key aspects: First, the emotionalization of imagery. Garden elements (rocks, streams, flora, weather) are imbued with human emotions, becoming symbolic expressions of sentiment. For instance, "willows" symbolize parting, "plum blossoms" represent purity, "flowing water" signifies time's passage, and "withered flowers" mark youth's fading—these images enhance emotional subtlety and impact. Second, the unity of artistic conception. Through meticulous arrangement of garden landscapes, opera artists create aesthetic realms that resonate with the characters' emotions. The "melancholy beauty" of the back garden in *The Peony Pavilion*, the "gloomy grandeur" of the imperial garden in *The Palace of Eternal Life*, and the "serene tranquility" of Qixia Mountain in *The Peach Blossom Fan* all achieve this unity of artistic conception and emotional depth, allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the characters' inner worlds. Thirdly, the lyrical quality of the language. The lyrics often employ poetic language, emphasizing rhythm, antithesis, and rhetorical devices. For instance, the couplet in *The Peony Pavilion*—"Morning blooms, evening petals, cloud-like pavilions; rain threads, wind fragments, misty waves, painted boats"—is both visually stunning and rhythmically dynamic, vividly depicting the garden's beauty while intensifying the emotional expression.

4. Conclusion

The cultural encounter between Qing Dynasty opera and gardens was not an accidental artistic superposition, but a deep integration and creative presentation of China's traditional culture during a specific historical period. Their core values and unique status have left a significant mark in the history of China's culture and aesthetics. The garden in the opera of Qing Dynasty has long gone beyond the category of physical space, and become a cultural symbol that carries the Chinese national cultural memory, aesthetic ideal and spiritual belief. Its artistic experience, cultural connotation and historical value will continue to shine in the long river of Chinese culture, providing inexhaustible inspiration and enlightenment for the future generations.

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