On Li Yu’s Aesthetic Concepts about Originality First in Building House and Garden—After Reading *House and Garden in Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*

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**Abstract.** The paper is to discuss and analyze Li Yu’s aesthetic originality by taking *House and Garden in Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling* as the data in order to find a true Li Yu and his authentic aesthetic thinking in building. The discussion is carried out from the following perspectives, the designing of the suspended ceiling, the movable roof, the terrain of the house, the house orientation, the tortuous path and the small rockery of the garden. The analysis proves that Li Yu, a greater thinker and cultural giant, is good at originality in seemingly average house and garden building by adapting the design to local conditions in order to achieve a harmonious unity between man and nature.

**Introduction**

One of the most important spiritual qualities in Li Yu's aesthetic thoughts is "seeking originality and novelty", which reflects in the dynamic innovation and personalized design in almost every aspect of garden and house construction. Li Yu strongly objects to following the great craftsmen and imitating the examples of the famous gardens. Instead, Li Yu advocates creativity which is conducted out of his own extraordinary conception and unique design. Creation depends on people's subjectivity, mainly on inspiration and wisdom. Only creation can change life, and only wise people can help others live a better life. The thinker must have stood on the high ground of the time, with the vision and the greatest wisdom of his contemporaries. Li Yu is such a greater thinker and cultural giant in the feudal society. Although his life is bumpy and controversial, his original wisdom, his original innovation and his original contribution to the Chinese philosophy and culture can never be overstated. This paper is to discuss and analyze Li Yu’s aesthetic originality by taking *House and Garden in Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling* as the data in order to find a true Li Yu and his authentic aesthetic thinking.

**Towards Li Yu’s Concept of Aesthetic Originality in House and Garden**

Li Yu is proud of his two unique skills. One is appreciating music; the other is building houses and gardens. He likes composing lyrics, and asks actors and actresses to sing his own lyrics and to teach them by himself. He renews the old lyrics by deleting some stale elements, and makes new ones from the current style. The second one is building houses and gardens, which is not to be bound by the existing concepts. He advocates that every single corner of the house and garden should be unique, so that the passers-by or visitors can appreciate the specialty of his design. In *House and Garden*, Li Yu claims that a house is welcomed with exquisite, unique, and elegant style, but not an ornate style. Those who like ornate style generally have no ideas on how to build a unique house (Du, 2014:375). Li Yu (Du, 2014:375) employs a metaphor to illustrate his viewpoint. Assuming there are two types of clothes: one is made of average material, but with the novel design and style, so looks elegant, and the other is made of gorgeous material such as silk and satin, but with average design and style. Undoubtedly, everyone loves silk and satin, and
appreciates their merits as well. However, the clothes with the novel design and style may easily attract the attention of all for its unique style which people have never seen before.

Li Yu (Du, 2014:371) regards constructing house and garden as the most significant event for every family, and criticizes those who cannot innovate, or even cannot make improvement in house construction. He looks down upon the incompetent literati who can change a few words by following stereotypes, and still brag about himself. Li Yu cannot help shouting: Why have they lowered their status to such an extent? Li Yu also despises those who would like to ask builders to copy the exteriors and styles of someone else’s. If there is any difference compared with others’, they should feel ashamed, instead of feeling happy as far as innovation is concerned. Some high officials or noble lords, who build their houses and gardens at vast expenses, always ask chief-craftsmen to follow the exteriors and styles of other people’s houses and gardens. To be specific, they cannot bear any differences in pavilion and terraced building. Likewise, those craftsmen often boast their contribution after finishing construction project, saying there is no difference between the houses and gardens they built and the famous ones, especially the door, the window, and the hallway. Li Yu criticizes them for refusing to make innovation, or even improvement. He wonders why they demean themselves in this way?

Li Yu advocates the thought of making originality by means of adapting to local conditions in order to achieve a harmonious integration of man and nature, which occupies an important position in Li Yu’s house and garden aesthetic concept, and runs through and permeates all the theoretical literatures about garden and house art in *Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*. Now let’s make some practical analysis to see how Li Yu succeeds in achieving original architectural aesthetics of harmonious whole beauty.

**Practical Analysis**

**Originality in Building Movable Roof**

In the text of Movable Roof, Li Yu (Du, 2014:380) claims that the most important thing about a house, whether it is exquisite or rough, is to shelter people from the wind and rain. Some beautiful buildings are often built just for appreciation, instead of fulfilling practical purposes, either because they are too spacious or because they are too tall. Therefore, the pillars should not be too long, or it would attract rain water; the windows should not be more than necessary, or wind would go straight into the house.

Li Yu suggests that the length of pillar and the number of windows should be in proportion with the house. Some poor families have smaller houses, and they are in a dilemma to build deeper eaves to stop the wind and rain, or to build long windows to receive more light. For the former, they worry that the light will be blocked and the rooms would be too dark, and for the latter they worry that rain will intrude the house. To address this problem, Li Yu proposes a compromise solution- installing a rotatable window-hood. That is, put a board shed under the tile eaves, on both ends of which is installed a rotating shaft that can push the board shed up or down. On a sunny day, let the front side of the board shed down to serve as the roof under the outside eaves; when it rains, let the front up, to gather the water dripping from the eaves. In this way, Li Yu thinks that people can take advantage of the weather conditions.

**Originality in Designing Suspended Ceiling**

In “Suspended Ceiling” (Du, 2014:381), Li Yu says that the ceiling of exquisite room is covered with either boards or pasted with papers so that the rafters and tiles cannot be seen. The board ceiling is often used to cover rafters and tiles that is thought ugly if exposed outside, a traditional suspending ceiling in ancient China. Although all people accept this practice, Li Yu does not think so. His reasons that because more often than not the roof is high and the eaves are low, and thus most house-owners want to have the roof and the eaves kept at the same level by building a suspended ceiling in order to have it look nicer. In this way, a big, spacious and useful area would be wasted, leaving mice to make a nest in it. Someone who is reluctant to waste the space of the
room might have the suspended ceiling stuck to rafters. However, the house does not look nice either, and seems clumsy as well, with the ceiling high at the middle, low at the front and back.

To address this problem, Li Yu puts forwards his own opinion that is not only unique but smart as well. Li Yu says that he has come up with a new way for suspended ceiling, leave some space in the middle of the ceiling and build it in the shape of the bamboo hat, which is projected from the above with all the round board pressed in. Li Yu thinks that the new ceiling design does not cost much, and the construction process is very simple as well. Choose the same board material for the traditional suspended level ceiling. Remove the middle part for making the bamboo-hat shaped central ceiling, whose size and shape can be determined by the house owner. If it is round, the round redundant material removed from the board can be used to make round three-dimensional bamboo-hat shaped central ceiling, supported by a section of the one foot high vertical plates around the stereoscopic hat-shaped ceiling, one or two layers of vertical plates will be enough, up to the house owner's preference. If the bamboo-hat shaped central ceiling is in square, the square redundant material removed from the board can follow the same process. In this way, a round-shaped or a square-shapes stereoscopic suspended ceiling has come into being. On the vertical plates of the stereoscopic suspended ceiling, the calligraphy and painting can be written or painted, making it the round suspended ceiling look like hand-scroll, and the square look like book pages, simple and elegant, novel and appropriate indeed. The square shaped suspended can be installed with a door, which can be used as a storage room, equal to closets.

**Originality in Building Tortuous Path**

Fundamentally speaking, the creation of gardens is not the creation of the object, but the creation of mind and heart, which helps to organize space, arranges space and changes space mainly according to local conditions, so as to create the natural beauty of gardens. A good example can be found in the Path section, in which Li Yu divides the path into two types: direct ones and tortuous ones. From the viewpoint of the practicality, Li Yu says that no path is more convenient than the direct one, from the aesthetic perspective. Li Yu thinks of the tortuous one as the most wonderful. People are always not satisfied with the practical side at the sacrifice of the aesthetic side. And therefore, Li Yu thinks that if the house-owner deliberately has his path paved in tortuous style, a side door should be installed for family’s convenience. The side door can be opened when it is urgently needed and closed when it is not. In this way, aesthetic function and practical function are both given consideration. Deliberately building a path in tortuous style can be regarded as a good example of organizing space, arranging space and changing space mainly according to local conditions from the aesthetic perspective. In the aesthetic sense, the tortuous way has enlarged the aesthetic area of the garden and increased its aesthetic space, which also contains and reflects the creative originality of the gardener, Li Yu.

The tortuous path makes me think of Zhu Guangqian. Zhu guangqian (2017:159) told a story. On the Alps, there are a lot of very beautiful scenery along a road. There is a sign on the roadside to remind visitors: "walk slowly, enjoy ah!" To this, Mr. Zhu guangqian comments: "many people live in this busy world, just like taking a car ride in an alpine valley, rushing by in such a hurry that they have no time to look back and enjoy the scenery. As a result, this rich and gorgeous world has become a prison with no interest. What a pity it is!" Li Yu’s tortuous path provides the reader with the his aesthetic viewpoint about how to live in a leisurely way.

**Originality in Building Terrain of House and in Designing House Orientation**

The thought of taking measures according to local conditions occupies an important position in Li Yu's whole house and garden aesthetic system, which runs through visibly or invisibly from the beginning to the end of the book. In *Terrain of House*, Li Yu holds that house should not be built as level as a plain, but should have its higher side and lower side. This rule should also be followed when building the garden and house. The formula is high on the front side and low on the rear side. However, Li Yu thinks that it is very rigid to build a house by strictly following the tradition when the terrain is not high on the front side and low on the rear side. Li Yu puts forward a suggestion:
tailor measures to suit local conditions. He thinks that people can build house on the higher land, and build several-story tower on the lower land. Another solution for Li Yu is that people can pile stones on the lower level of ground and dig pond on the higher level of ground, because if people build pavilion or rockeries on the higher level of ground, it will make the ground look much higher than before. Likewise, ponds being dug on the lower level ground will make the ground look much lower than ever. Therefore, Li Yu thinks that there is no fixed patterns of practice. Taking measures according to local conditions is the best principle and solution in achieving the ecological harmonious beauty.

In Orientation, Li Yu talks about the direction that the house faces and the window’s position. Li Yu argues that house-front should face south. Since not all houses are built to face south, supposing facing north, the house should have windows on its rear wall to harbor sunshine from south. Similarly, the house facing east should have windows on its right wall while the one facing west on its left wall. If there is no spare room to have windows on the three walls mentioned above, a skylight should be installed for getting light. Li Yu pays great attention to the ecological harmonious beauty by adopting the principle of adapting to local conditions and guiding one's actions according to circumstances. He emphasizes that building the house does not mean only the house, people must realize that the window contributes a lot in achieving the house’s ecological whole harmonious beauty, because the function of one big window equals to two small doors, and high window equals to two low windows. Only in this way can a kind of harmonious unity of the whole beauty be achieved.

Originality in Building Small Rockery

In Building Small Rockery, Li Yu first puts forward the reason why people build rockery, that is, people cannot live in natural environment, for they have to comfort themselves with artificial hills and waters. Li Yu has his own unique artistic vision for the beauty of rockery. The first choice for making rockery is stones. Li Yu thinks that if the stones are arranged by putting the ones with the same texture and the same color together, the seam between them would be clear and appear artificial, so the rockery had better be piled up by the stones in a casual way. And Li Yu insists that the nature of the hill should be respected, where stones have to be piled up is a horizontal and perpendicular, and slanting and straight manner. Otherwise, the rockery would be neither beautiful nor possible to last for long.

As for the rockery, Li Yu says that the evaluation criteria of rockery are “connection through mutual penetration, translucence, and standing aloof”. Connection through mutual penetration means that the stones which constitute the rockeries should connect with each other through a path of mutual penetration. Translucence refers to the holes dotted in the rockery. Standing aloof implies the individual stones of the rockery should stand straight on their own in the air though connected in some parts with each other to constitute a whole. Li Yu thinks that generally speaking, the principle of “connection through mutual penetration and standing aloof” are the basic criteria for building the rockery, while translucence is conditional and should avoid going to extremes. If a rockery is dotted with holes throughout, it may look like man-made earthenware which has predetermined numbers of holes with regularly limited size, the natural beauty is lost. Besides, to make the rockery look real, some of holes or cracks on the surface of the rockery could be made to appear blocked, but a closer look would lead to somewhere that is through, which is thus more consistent with the nature of a real stone hill.

Li Yu also argues that a small rockery should have a wide top and a narrow base; otherwise, it would lose its glamour, just like a woman with a beautiful face but large feet. Li Yu’s metaphor reflects his viewpoint that men are superior to women. Because of limited space, it will be discussed in other articles. As for the shape of the holes, Li Yu thinks that they should not be complete round, even if they are naturally round shaped, the holes should be further processed with gravels to increase the reality.

The three main characteristics of the aesthetics viewpoint about the rockery: connection through mutual penetration, translucence, and standing aloof had been raised by Dong Qichang in the Ming
Dynasty, who once said, "the law of drawing rockery is connection through mutual penetration, translucence, and standing aloof." Li Yu, on the other hand, inherited the ideas of his predecessors. It can be seen that in creating the second nature, Li Yu always takes the subjective feeling as the starting point and the destination of the creation which makes the objects personified and emotional so that the object becomes the expressive form of the subjective emotion and the aesthetic form of the subject personality and surpass the first nature. Taking respects nature and follow the law of the nature. Li Yu regards it as magical to turn city into mountains, thinking it only could be done by immortals or by talents. Li Yu thinks himself a genius in it.

Conclusion

Li Yu is a great thinker, he can find original ideas and display superior aesthetic wisdom and insight in the actual world, including building the house and garden. This paper discusses and analyzes Li Yu's aesthetic originality permeated in designing and building the house and garden and how he successfully makes it by integrating his original talent with the natural local surroundings. Li Yu is extraordinary in creating unique design of the house and garden. Creation depends on people's subjective inspiration and wisdom. Only original creation can change life, only wise people can help improve people's life. Li Yu is such a greater wise man and cultural innovator in the feudal society. Now in the era of vigorously advocating entrepreneurship and innovation, Li Yu's original aesthetic concept, blazed with humanism in construction expressed in his Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling is still instructive and insightful, and thus it deserves proper evaluation and attention. His contribution to the Chinese philosophical thinking and culture can never be overstated.

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