The Spatial Feature of Different Attraction Functions in Changchun Garden from the Aspect of Horizontal Tablet

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Abstract: This study focuses on the spatial features of Changchun Garden in China from the perspective of horizontal tablets. From the perspective of attraction functions, the spatial features of Changchun Garden have been analyzed and considered comprehensively by combining the grouping of horizontal tablets. The attractions with a residential function reflected the atmosphere and the artistic conception of the emperor’s residence through the horizontal tablets, which also expressed the emperor’s self-restraint. In the attractions with a sightseeing function, the horizontal tablets described Chinese and western style garden landscapes and highlighted the unique sightseeing experience. The horizontal tablets in the attractions with a religious function underlined the ideological connotation of religion to the natural landscape. In the attractions with a political function, the horizontal tablets corresponded to the layout of the space, and expressed the emperor’s political ideals and pursuits. This study will suggest that understanding the relationship between attraction functions and horizontal tablet meanings helps to elucidate the garden’s spatial features and offers greater insight into the meaning of Chinese traditional gardens.

Keywords: Changchun Garden, horizontal tablet, attraction functions, garden spatial feature

1. Introduction

Located in the northwest suburbs of Beijing, the construction of Changchun Garden began in the 10th year of the Qianlong period. It is the largest royal garden, built by Emperor Qianlong to meet the needs of various activities after his abdication. However, it was destroyed due to the war that took place in the 10th year of the Xianfeng period. Changchun Garden consisted of multiple small gardens known as attractions. These attractions had different functions to satisfy different requirements of the emperor, including habitation, sightseeing, ceremonial, and so on. In Chinese classical gardens, the landscapes were often named and identified through the use of suspended horizontal tablets (Figure-1) to convey the intentions of the garden designer. Hence, the horizontal tablet is a bond connecting the actual space and the artistic conception of the garden designer. Although Changchun Garden no longer exists, historical records confirm that there were plenty of horizontal tablets suspended in this garden. The understanding of the meaning of the horizontal tablets in Changchun Garden is helpful in understanding the concepts of the garden and in obtaining a better overview of the spatial features of the garden.

Previous studies of the horizontal tablets are from the perspective of literature, philosophy and aesthetics, while some focus on the relationship between horizontal tablets and garden buildings or spatial features of the gardens. Gu and Wang chose private gardens in the south of the Yangtze River as the objects of study, and studied the relationship between the meanings of the tablets and the garden space. Zhang and Han selected the northern royal garden, Summer Palace, as the object of study to research the spatial features of the garden. Studies of the horizontal tablets in Changchun Garden mainly focus on the history of the garden construction, the overall planning, and the restoration of the site, and research on the horizontal tablets at Changchun Garden is limited to the enumeration of the contents of these tablets. At present, there is no research into the spatial features of Changchun Garden from the perspective of the horizontal tablets. Therefore, the horizontal tablets in Changchun Garden are the objects of this study which analyses the meanings of the tablets, confirms the types and features of them, examines the relationship between the attraction functions and the meanings of the tablets, and confirms the spatial features of Changchun Garden. Together with the relevant historical background, the study also comprehensively reviews the gardening art and methods in the garden.

2. Research Object and Method

(1) Research Object

After renovation and expansion works during the Daoguang-Xianfeng period (1814-1858), Changchun Garden was made up of 21 attractions (Table-1) and had reached its maximum scale. This is the period chosen to confirm the horizontal tablets for 18 attractions with the records of horizontal tablets by referring to the literature, especially the General Interpretation of Couplets and Horizontal Tablets in Yuanmingyuan, which collected and collated the tablets in Changchun Garden most thoroughly. After omitting any illegible or ambiguous horizontal tablets, 287 tablets were determined as the objects of this study.

(2) Research Method

The research commenced with an investigation of papers about and pictures of Changchun Garden. The plane layout, function and distribution of the attractions at the garden were collated. In addition, the layout of the garden was drawn by referring to the General Layout of Changchun Garden and other relevant materials (Figure-2). The names and specific positions of the 287 horizontal tablets as well as the types of buildings on which these tablets were suspended were confirmed and the meanings of these tablets were also collated and confirmed by referring to the previous research (Table-2). A clustering methodology (Ward method and squared Euclidean distance) was used to group the tablets based on their meaning, and the main types was identified. The functions of the attractions at Changchun Garden were...
classified into four types by referring to previous research, namely residence, sightseeing, religion and politics. By combining the types of the tablets, the proportion of the various types to the attractions with different functions could be confirmed. The features of the space where various tablets were located could also be confirmed. In combination of historical and cultural background, spatial features and construction methods of Changchun Garden were considered comprehensively.

3. Classification of Meanings and Grouping of Horizontal Tablets

(1) Classification of Meanings of Horizontal Tablets

This study refers to the classification basis defined by Zhang, Ham, and Wang for the meanings of the horizontal tablets. Based on Li's explanation and analysis of the meanings of tablets in Changchun Garden, these tablets can be classified into two categories: ideology and landscape. The ideological meanings are divided into five subclasses: talent and morality, benevolent government, wisdom, religion, and seclusion and fairyland. The landscape meanings are divided into five subclasses: architecture, season, astronomical meteorology, natural objects, and the five senses.

(2) Grouping of Horizontal Tablets

In accordance with this classification of the meanings, clustering analysis of the 287 horizontal tablets was performed to classify the tablets into three groups (Table-3). Group A consists of 145 tablets which reflect nature objects, architecture, and the five senses in the landscape category as well as religion, seclusion and fairyland in the ideological category. "Natural objects and the architectural landscape are regarded as the core, and some extend to the ideology of immortal and religion", which is the significant feature of the horizontal tablets in Group A. Group B includes 62 tablets which reflect astronomical meteorology, season, natural objects, and the five senses in the landscape category. "Natural landscape which fuses astronomical meteorology and season changes", is the significant feature of Group B. Group C includes 80 tablets which reflect talent and morality, benevolent government, wisdom, and religion in the ideological category. "Concept, character and the morals of self-development, state governance and truth seeking", are the significant features of Group C.

4. Spatial Features of Changchun Garden

Changchun Garden was a royal garden long used by emperors in past dynasties and the attractions had all kinds of functions. In this study, the attractions in Changchun Garden are divided by their functions into the categories of residence, sightseeing, religion and politics, by referring to previous studies. These functions are combined with the above meaning types through the application of clustering analysis. The spatial features of the attractions are analysed from the perspectives of the groups of tablets and their meanings in the attractions with different functions.

(1) Attractions with a Residential Function
There were ten attractions with a residential function in Changchun Garden (2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 19), and there were 239 horizontal tablets. According to the grouping of tablets, the tablets of seven attractions mainly concentrate in Group A, while tablets of one attraction mainly concentrate in Group C. The tablets of the other two attractions are evenly distributed between Group A, Group B and Group C (Table 4).

The horizontal tablets for seven attractions concentrate in Group A. In each attraction, the proportion of the number of horizontal tablets in Group A to the total number of horizontal tablets is over 50%, while the proportions of the numbers of horizontal tablets in Group B and Group C is below 30% (Table 4). In these seven attractions, the horizontal tablets mainly describe the spatial landscape which is formed by combining natural scenery and buildings where the garden users resided. Some attractions describe the seasons and astronomical meteorology while others express self-development and state governance from an ideological level. For example, in Ru Garden (13, Fig. 3-1), the horizontal tablet Guanfeng Balcony (ascending a high place and overlooking the good harvest of rice field) is in Group A. The balcony where the horizontal tablet was located was built on the peak of the hill on the east side of Ru Garden, where the terrain was high, and people could overlook the rice field outside the garden. Other tablets such as Rui Cao Ying Ting (lush growth of trees and grass in the garden) are in Group B and Group C (Table 4).
Qi Yao and others horizontal tablets in Group A include 64-represented flowers and trees. The environment was quiet, beautiful and secluded. The artificial hill was built besides the buildings which were surrounded by large, and they were adjacent to the large water area of Ru Garden. The scale of the buildings where the three horizontal tablets were located (a habitable room) have meanings of “natural objects” and “architecture”. Examples such as 234-represented flowers, trees, artificial hills and water from the buildings, with spaces of illumination all things and the beautiful scenery of spring blossom. The horizontal tablet expresses the meaning of the season. The horizontal tablets in Group B include examples such as 208-which in a small part combine seasonal elements to depict residential scenes. The building was high, commanding a wide view. The early morning of spring, visitors could view the light of spring illuminating all things and the beautiful scenery of spring blossom. The horizontal tablet expressed the meaning of the season. The horizontal tablets in Group C include examples such as 253-which in a small part combine landscape and ideology. These tablets express the emperor’s self-awareness of daily life and political responsibility.

The horizontal tablets of two attractions (12, 14) are evenly distributed between Group A, Group B and Group C (33.3% respectively as shown in Table-4). The meanings of these horizontal tablets in the two attractions combine landscape and ideology. These tablets express the emperor’s pursuit of ideology while depicting natural scenery in the garden space. For instance, in 深寧堂 Sanyou Windowed Veranda (“Three cold-weather friends” - pine, plum and bamboo which are considered as the symbols of good characters, with the extended meaning that making friends with right-minded and honest people enables a wide range of knowledge) in Group C was located in a building with a window overlooking an area where pine, plum and bamboo were planted to form a lush landscape. The horizontal tablet expresses the meaning of “talent and morality” by natural objects or the natural environment in the surrounding attraction space. Thus, the tablets on the attraction Hanjing Hall expresses the emperor’s praise of good behaviour by landscape extension in meaning and association with the ideological level. Overall, the meanings of the horizontal tablets on the residential attractions in Changchun Garden are mainly directly correlated to the surrounding landscape. The tranquil beautiful atmosphere and the artistic conception of the dwelling where the emperor lived were expressed by the spatial formation of a landscape which included a combination of natural objects such as artificial hills, water, flowers and grass with the architecture, changes of season such as spring and fall, and the astronomical meteorology such as the setting sun and moon, etc. At the same time, the atmosphere of the space reflected the emperor’s characteristics of self-discipline, self-development and considerations of state governance as well as other ideological concepts, and these were represented through the horizontal tablets (Figure-4).
(2) Attractions with a Sightseeing Function

In Changchun Garden, there were seven attractions with a sightseeing function (5, 9, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21), out of which four attractions had records of horizontal tablets (5, 9, 15, 18). There were 23 tablets in total. According to the grouping of these tablets, the tablets for one attraction (5) mainly fall in Group A; the tablets for one attraction (9) are evenly distributed between Group A and Group B; the tablets of one attraction (15) are evenly distributed between Group A and Group C; and only one tablet of one attraction (18) is in Group C (Table-4).

The horizontal tablets for the 海岳开襟 Sea of Magnanimity (5, Fig.-3-2) attraction mainly fall into Group A with 68.8% in this group, 12.5% in Group B and 18.7% in Group C (Table-4). These horizontal tablets mainly describe natural objects and the architectural landscape in a sightseeing space. Some tablets compare the beautiful scenery and the attractions to fairyland and associate this with the emperor’s benevolent government and power, such as the horizontal tablet 94-海岳开襟 Sea of Magnanimity (the building at the centre of lake symbolises a celestial mountain on the sea, and mounting on the building makes one open-minded) in Group A. The attraction where the horizontal tablet was located was in the centre of the lake. Visitors to this three-storey central building would see a vast expanse of water. Meanwhile, the image created by the placing of a building on the lake is similar to that of the celestial mountain in Chinese myth. The horizontal tablet 98-乘六龍 Cheng Liu Long (God of the Sun is like a cloud-dragon, with the extended meaning that the emperor was supported because of benevolent government) in Group C was also located in the above building. The fairyland meaning of the Sea of Magnanimity is associated with the gods, and this meaning extends to the mode of governance of the emperor. The horizontal tablets in this attraction described the landscape of the island on the lake using fairyland as a metaphor and bringing together the meanings of “benevolent government”, “fairyland and seclusion”, “architecture” and “natural objects”, whilst expressing the wish to visit and appreciate the fairyland and the emperor’s political pursuit.

The horizontal tablets for the 仿伊阆苑 Zhuangxiangfang Storied House (9) attraction are equally distributed between Group A and Group B (50% respectively, Table-4). The tablets express the sightseeing experience of garden visitors through the description of the seasonal landscape, such as the horizontal tablet 143-平湖镜影 Ping Chou Jiao Yuan Feng (in the field after raining at the turn of the summer and fall, the fresh breeze blows gently, and rice and millet contend for beauty) in Group B. The attraction was built on the open flat land on the shore of the lake, and surrounded by exuberant grass and trees. At the turn of the summer and fall, the landscape was quite similar to the rural scenery described by the horizontal tablet. Thus, the horizontal tablets for this attraction manifested the meanings of season and natural objects, and depicted the natural landscape for sightseeing in the specific seasons.

The horizontal tablets of the 谐奇趣 Harmonious Wonder (15, Fig.-3-3) attraction are equally distributed between Group A and Group C (50% respectively, Table-4). Harmonious Wonder is an attraction in the western style. Historical paintings show that this attraction integrated plenty of western elements in its design (Fig.-3-3). The tablets for this attraction described entity space of this attraction from the perspective of the natural landscape, and extend this to reflection and enlightenment in the sightseeing process, such as the horizontal tablet 284-諧奇趣 Harmonious Wonder (adaptive to all kinds of wonderful temperaments and interests) in Group C demonstrated how the western-style architecture differed greatly from the architecture of other Chinese traditional attractions in the garden, but the landscape was also beautiful and grand. The designer was thus inspired to express the emperor’s ideological proposal of “all-inclusiveness”. Hence, the tablets for this attraction describe a western-style landscape, and express praise for the active integration of western culture.

For another western-style attraction, 海晏堂 Haiyan Hall (18, Fig.-3-4), there was a single horizontal tablet, and this is in Group C (Table-4). The horizontal tablet is 286-海晏堂 Haiyan Hall (The sea is calm without waves, with the metaphor of peace over the land). Historical paintings show the building where the horizontal tablet was located was adjacent to a large-scale fountain basin (Fig.-3-4). The horizontal tablet compared this water landscape to the sea which was considered as the symbol of the world in ancient legend, and expressed the emperor’s dream of benevolent government and wish for a safe, steady and flourishing age through the description of the waterscape.

On the whole, the sightseeing attractions includes Chinese and western style landscapes. Natural objects, the seasons and other landscape forms provides a varied sightseeing experience to visitors. Through describing and associating landscape, horizontal tablets sublimated from natural beautiful scenery to the thought on “fairyland”, “life philosophy”, “governing thought”, even outlook of nature and world outlook in the sightseeing process. In such space, various kinds of thoughts and aesthetics are all-inclusive, in blossom and unusually brilliant (Figure-4).

(3) Attractions with a Religious Function

In Changchun Garden, there were three attractions with a religious function (6, 7, 17), with a total of 19 horizontal tablets. When considering the grouping of these horizontal tablets, the tablets for two attractions (7, 17) are mainly in Group A, while the tablets for the third attraction (6) are mainly classified in Group C (Table-4).

The horizontal tablets for two attractions (7, 17) are mainly classified in Group A, with a proportion of above 65% and with less than 25% in Groups B and C (Table-4). These tablets vividly conveyed religious thought reflecting the landscape in the attractions and utilizing architecture, natural objects and the seasonal landscape as metaphors. For example, in 宝相寺 Baoxiang Temple (7, Fig.-3-5), the horizontal tablet 120-宝相寺 Chengguang Storied Building (the reflected image of the building is glistening and clear, which symbolises the peace, quietness and wisdom of Buddhism) in Group A. The building where this horizontal tablet was located faced water, and garden visitors could view the glistening lake surface while practicing meditation, resting, or relaxing. In addition, this attraction was surrounded by a thick grove to create calm and a quiet space, so that visitors could sense the spirituality, be far from the crowds, and experience the stillness. For the horizontal tablet 124-法慧寺 Tanfei Storied Building (Buddha dharma is ingenious beyond description like the fragrance of epiphylum) in Group A, epiphylum was in full bloom around the building, and its fragrance pervaded the senses. The designer extracted and extended the meaning of this natural object to express worship and belief in Buddhism. The horizontal tablet 125-法慧寺 Xian Da Yuan Jing (wise like a mirror) in Group C echoed with its water-adjoining site characteristics. The horizontal tablet compared water to a bright mirror and expressed how those believing in Buddhism could gain wisdom and understand all. Thus, the tablets for these two attractions endowed the landscape with religious meaning, while assimilating and interpreting the ideological implication of religion through the landscape.

The horizontal tablets for the 法慧寺 Fahui Temple (6) attraction are
mainly in Group C (66.7%), with 33.3% in Group A. There is no horizontal tablet for this attraction in Group B (Table-4). The content of these horizontal tablets expresses how religion can help people to see truth clearly, make a clear distinction between right and wrong, and comprehend the true essence of faith. For instance, the horizontal tablet 117-光明性海 (Guanming Xing Hai, religious wisdom like brilliant rays can show disposition clearly) in Group C was located in the rear hall of Fahui Temple. This building was surrounded by hills to create a pure, simple and undisturbed atmosphere. The sunny slope of the terrain where the building was located had long hours of sunshine. The horizontal tablet metaphorically interpreted the wisdom as light through sunshine and explained the favour brought about by religious belief. 112-闇二法門 Chaneri Door (see the essence through the phenomenon) in Group C was located at the Sanmon of Fahui Temple. The Sanmon refers to the unique entrance space of Chinese classical temples and endows a solemn ceremonial sense to the attraction space. The Sanmon conveyed the thought that religion brings truth to human beings with its horizontal tablet, and expressed the holy artistic concept of religious sacrificial activity.

On the whole, the horizontal tablets of attractions with a religious function had an ideological connotation with religion through describing the landscape in the surrounding space. This ideological connotation and the importance of religion were expressed through the natural landscape. Additionally, some horizontal tablets associated religion with wisdom and expressed the concept that religion is truth and brings wisdom to people. In brief, the meaning of religion dominates such spaces (Figure-4).

(4) Attractions with a Political Function

In Changchun Garden, the Danhuai Hall (1, Fig.-3-6) was the only attraction with a political function, and had a total of six horizontal tablets. In terms of the grouping of these tablets, the tablets are mainly in Group C (50%), with some in Group A (33.3%) and Group B (16.7%) (Table-4).

The horizontal tablets of Danhuai Hall expressed the emperor’s goals and his pursuit of political achievements, character and morals through the means of benevolent government. For instance, the horizontal tablet 3-梁在人和 Le Zai Ren He (both the emperor and common people are harmonious and happy) in Group C and the horizontal tablet 5-錦香亭 Jingxiang Pavilion (the positive influence of benevolent government is lasting) in Group A refer to the meaning of benevolent government. As the main hall of Changchun Garden, Danhuai Hall had a clear north-south axis and was the location for significant ceremonial and political activities to be held in Changchun Garden. At the same time, this location had a majestic royal atmosphere, and this resonated with the concept of benevolent government expressed by the horizontal tablets. The tablets expressed the emperor’s encouragement, remonstration and introspection during the execution of his political duties as well as his concern for his people’s welfare and territory stability, while emphasizing the emperor’s authority and royal order. Therefore, as the sole attraction with a political function in Changchun Garden, the horizontal tablets at Danhuai Hall described the correct way of running the state, and the ideal state of living in harmony with the people. This was also the desire of the emperor who wished to provide benevolent government. The corresponding spatial layout utilized the strict axially symmetric courtyard layout to create the rigorous normative political space typical of a Chinese traditional palace, which conformed to the characteristic features of Changchun Garden as a royal garden (Figure-4).

5. Conclusions

The objects of this study are the horizontal tablets of Changchun Garden during the Daoguang-Xianfeng period. The meanings of these tablets were collated and classified according to the functional features of the attractions. Furthermore, the space in Changchun Garden was analysed according to the perspective of the functions of the attractions. The attractions with a residential function reflected a tranquil and beautiful atmosphere and the artistic conception of the residence of the emperor, described through the horizontal tablets. This also corresponded to the emperor’s self-development and introspective thought, and manifested his self-restraint. The attractions with a sightseeing function described Chinese and western style landscapes through the tablets to highlight the unique sightseeing experience. The attractions with a religious function expressed the features of religion through the natural landscape and stressed the ideological connotations of religion by the tablets. The attraction with a political function used the meanings of the horizontal tablets to correspond with the strict axially symmetric courtyard layout of the space, and to express the emperor’s political ideals and pursuits.

This study only considered the horizontal tablets of one Chinese royal garden, Changchun Garden, as the object of study. There were also lots of horizontal tablets used in royal gardens throughout the history of Vietnam. Comparing horizontal tablets in Chinese and Vietnamese royal gardens will thus be the future research direction of this study.

Notes and References

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2) Attraction: the essence of the attractions is a small-scale garden which is the basic unit making up the Changchun Garden, and this has the role of distinguishing between the function and space of the different attractions.
3) Attraction function: the main application of the attraction was judged according to the main types of activity in the attraction. Then, the attraction functions were differentiated according to the main application of the attraction.
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5) Horizontal tablet: the horizontal tablet is a common literary and artistic form found in Chinese classical gardens. It is a tablet on which characters are written, and is suspended on the entrance or hall of a building.
6) Artistic conception stems from the combination of subjective ideas and emotion with objective fact and scenery in art creation.
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