

The Concept of “Oku” in Japanese and Chinese traditional paintings, gardens and architecture: a comparative study

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

“Oku is a sense of penetrating the layers of an onion; it implies something abstract, profound, innermost, extending far back, least accessible and deep...” In architecture “Oku” can be roughly translated from Japanese as an inner space lying somewhere in the deep end. However, the concept of “Oku” is much wider than its literal meaning. The experience of approaching “Oku” is like there is always something in front which encourages people to keep moving forward and search deeper. The word “Oku” was initially chosen by Maki Fumihiko to describe the particular sense of Japanese city and architectural space. However, similar spatial experience also can also be found in Chinese traditional gardens and architecture. History books inform that in early times Chinese culture had a big influence on Japanese culture and this influence also included the concept of “Oku”. But later the concept of “Oku” in Japan and China developed in different directions.

Nowadays, “Oku” remains as a particular characteristic of Japanese modern architecture and is widely recognized by the world. This achievement benefited from their continuous architectural development and profound decipherment of the tradition; while in China the success of modern Chinese architecture was limited, after going through the big social change, the spirit of Chinese traditional architecture was lost. Chinese architects still have not found the way to fill up the gulf between traditional and modern.

1.2 Research Objective

This thesis focuses on the on genesis, development and expression of the concept of “Oku” in Japanese and Chinese traditional paintings, gardens and architecture. By means of comparative analysis this study aims to explore a new way of inheriting Chinese “Oku” in Chinese modern architecture.

1.3 Hypothesis

There are three elements which contribute to create

sensory ‘depth’ (Figure 1); the route, layer qualities and space characters between layers. The thesis centers on the use of these three elements in Japanese and Chinese classic paintings, gardens and architecture to verify the mechanism for creating the sensory ‘depth’.

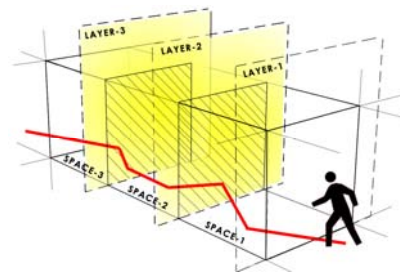


Figure 1. Three elements contribute to create the sensory ‘depth’

2. A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH OF THE CONCEPT “OKU” IN THE WEST AND EAST

2.1 What is “Oku”?

“Oku” is written in character of “奥” both used in Chinese and Japanese language and also shares three similar literal meanings: 1) private, intimate and deep; 2) exalted and sacred; 3) profound and recondite. These three literal interpretations of “Oku” are often reflected in paintings, gardens and architecture.

2.2 Areas and Lines

/ Pictogram and Phonogram / Network and Patchwork / Linear element and areal element /

The sense of “Oku” occurs on a planar platform; there is not much altitude variation during the experience of approaching “Oku”. Western and Eastern spatial sensibilities are linked to the nature of our writing systems,

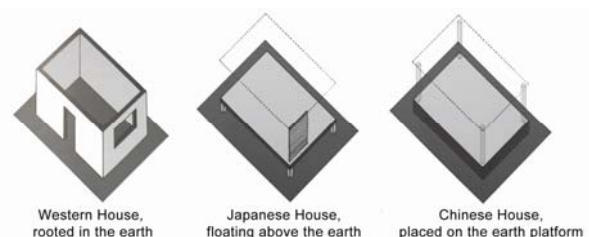


Figure 2. The way of houses connection to the earth

block divisions and also the way of buildings connecting to the earth (Figure 2). The sense of areal element is more conspicuous than linear element in Chinese and Japanese city and architecture space which is a necessary prerequisite for developing the concept of “Oku” in paintings, gardens and architecture.

3. THE CONCEPT OF “OKU” IN CHINESE AND JAPANESE TRADITIONAL PAINTINGS

3.1 “Oku” in Chinese Classic Poetry and Paintings

/ Visible and Invisible Vinculums/ Chinese Perspective /

In ancient China, the concept of “Oku” first appeared in poetry and paintings. The poetry was considered as “an invisible painting” and the painting as “a silent poetry”; it was believed that poetry and painting can echo each other through visible and invisible vinculums. For instance, figure 3 represents Chinese verses and a painting on two



Figure 3. Visible and Invisible Vinculums in Chinese poetry and painting

sides of a fan. The verses on the left mean “I will walk to the place where the waters end. Or sit and watch the time when the clouds rise”. Since nobody knows where the water ends, this allusion gave readers a vacant imagination space to free their minds and also several simple imageries – people, water and clouds emerged in our mind automatically while reading. Meanwhile, on the right painting, simple imageries – a traveler, small hill, some branches and a big vacancy, the mist or water in the middle of the painting; this unpainted vacancy also indicates that for the traveler the way ahead is still long and unpredictable. Therefore, poetry and painting echo each other by means of using signs, ‘simple imageries’ to build the visible linking bridge and the ‘vacancy’ to facilitate this notional transmit. Unpainted vacancy is an important way of creating sensory depth in Chinese classic poetry and paintings.

Reclusion in deep nature had been the main motif in Chinese classic landscape ink paintings. Chinese painters invented unique Chinese perspective, floating perspective to portray front mountains to distant mountains in different viewpoints on one painting to represent spatial depth

(Figure 4). Different from the Western perspective, there is more than one viewpoint in the Chinese landscape painting; each segment of one viewpoint can be considered as one layer, setting vacancy among layers solved the contradiction of multi-viewpoint and created sensory depth in landscape paintings.

3.2 “Oku” in Japanese Classic Paintings

/ Zen Sense / The motif of Journey / Wabi Sabi /

A famous Japanese Zen scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki explained the spirit of Zen is “The One in the Many and the Many in the One”, finding the truth which is hidden behind the intricacy. Therefore, the process of finding the truth in deep nature – Journey was depicted frequently in Japanese landscape paintings (Figure 4). The path is an important clue leading to the depth in the painting.



Middle view point / High view point / Low view point / Floating view points

Figure 4. Three perspectives and floating perspective in Chinese landscape paintings

Chinese “one-corner” style (the painting style on the right of Figure 2), which was considered reflecting the Zen sense of beauty, was setting a foreground area filled with substantial forms and the rest part was nearly or completely void. A refined and asymmetrical beauty and the imagination which was aroused by the unpainted blank represented in “one-corner” style painting can be considered as the expression of the concept of “Oku” in Japanese paintings.



Figure 5. Motif of Journey in Japanese landscape painting

Therefore, the concept of “Oku” in Chinese and Japanese classic paintings was expressed by means of setting ‘vacancy’ and overlapping layers. Meanwhile, the path also helps to extend the sense of “Oku”.

4. THE CONCEPT OF “OKU” IN CHINESE AND JAPANESE TRADITIONAL GARDENS

4.1 “Oku” in Chinese Traditional Gardens

/ Geometric Garden and Natural Garden / Circuitous Path / Vacancy and layers /

Western formal garden was the attachment to the architecture and was restricted in geometric and symmetrical layout; while the Chinese and Japanese traditional gardens were not dominated by architecture and reflecting an appreciation of nature.

Chinese traditional private gardens were focused more on circuitous route design and aimed at making routes tortuous and multivariant. Meanwhile, contradistinction used in garden space by means of multiple changing between narrow enclosed space and open bright space enriches visitors’ spatial experience and helps to create sensory depth in garden space (Figure 6).

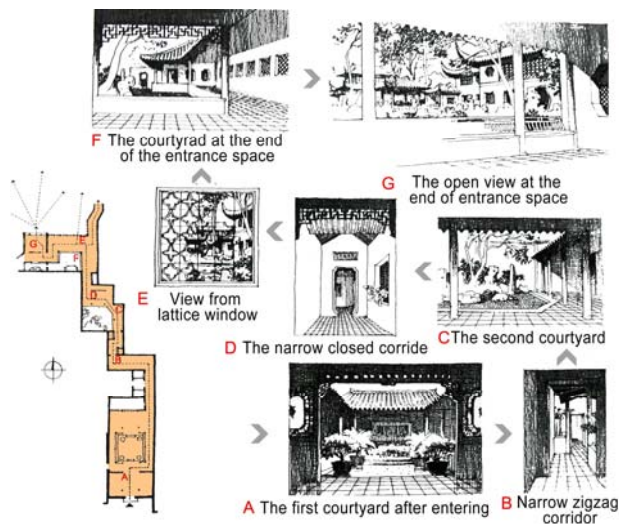


Figure 6. Space contradistinctions in Chinese garden, Liu Yuan

Meanwhile, setting ‘vacancy’ and ‘layers’ is also an efficient way in increasing sensory ‘depth’ in Chinese private gardens. The water forms a central dominating element; buildings are arranged around the water and opened to the water. The large tract of water can be considered as the ‘vacancy’ in Chinese private garden. Same as Chinese landscape ink paintings, an overlap of close-view layer, mid-view layer and distant-view layer creates special distance in garden sceneries. Two kinds of layers, virtual layer and substantial layer are employed in Chinese private gardens. Virtual layers refer to water, plants, rocks, lattice windows, verandas and bridges; substantial layers are architecture, brick walls or hills which totally obstruct the line of sight. Usually virtual layers and substantial layers are used together in order to increase the

sensory ‘depth’ in Chinese gardens (Figure 7).

4.2 “Oku” in Japanese Traditional Gardens

/ The Idea of Appreciation / Miniaturized Scenery / Path and Goal /

In Japanese literature, the word “sit”(座) is used a synonym of “meditation” which implies that sitting, appreciating and thinking was a major way for finding the truth in Zen philosophy. Hence, appreciation was valued in Japanese Zen gardens. Miniaturized sceneries in Japanese dry landscape gardens are considered as original creations in the development of Japanese gardens. The most abstract dry landscape gardens were designed without any water or plants. Dry garden reflects the sense of ‘vacant’ beauty in Zen spirit; the emptiness of white sand is similar as the unpainted blank in Zen ink paintings, the vacancy and the simple symbolic objects inspire profound insights. Another type of dry gardens was greatly influenced by Chinese perspective and reproduced the ‘depth’ in Chinese landscape painting in the scene of Japanese garden (Figure 8).

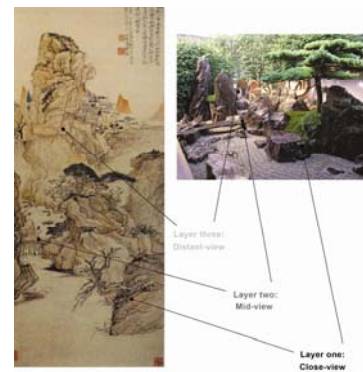


Figure 8. Comparison of Chinese landscape painting and Daisen-in dry garden

A journey was considered to be a way of finding the truth in Zen spirit. Similarly, in tea gardens, the motif of journey was accentuated by means of a ‘path’ design. The process of approaching the tea house was regarded as washing off the defilement from the outside world. Passing gates which were set at junctures in different sections symbolized people have to overcome difficulties for searching for a peaceful land and in the end the deepest place in the garden situated the simple but purified tea house. Therefore, the sensory “Oku” in Japanese gardens is expressed by means of ‘vacancy and layer’ setting and various path designing.

5. THE CONCEPT OF “OKU” IN CHINESE AND JAPANESE TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

5.1 “Oku” in Chinese Traditional Architecture

/ Axis and Symmetrical Planning / Gate and Courtyard

System /

The plan of Chinese traditional architecture was restricted to serious symmetrical plan which had lasted for twenty centuries. Along the north-south axis, based on the hierarchy and “Gate and courtyard system”, linear multi-courtyard layout of Chinese traditional architecture was generated. Figure 9 is a four-courtyard *siheyuan*, the

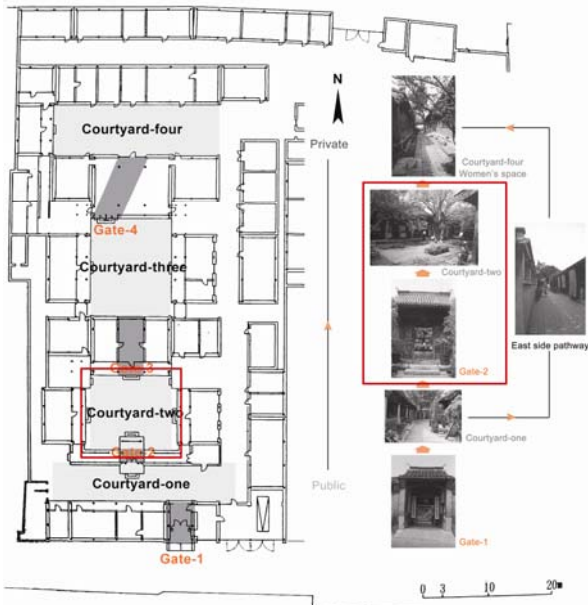


Figure 9. Courtyard hierarchical arrangement

second courtyard and buildings, which was the most luxurious courtyard, was the place for the owner for the purposes of living and receiving guests and therefore considered as the ‘centre’ of the whole residence. The third courtyard was a living space for the owner’s family. The last courtyard was the most private space where unmarried women of the family lived. The level of privacy rose gradually from the front to the rear along the north-south axis and the climax was the second courtyard which was obvious and visible in the whole residence.

5.2 “Oku” in Japanese Traditional Architecture

/ Shinden / Buke-yashiki / Machiya /

In early times, in the old Japanese village devotional centre (invisible centre) and village centre (visible centre) were situated in different places; this tradition which was regarded as the origin of the concept of “Oku” in Japanese cities. *Shoin* style architecture was considered as the start of asymmetrical plan and Japanese invisible “Oku” space in Japanese traditional architecture. In reality, the embryonic asymmetrical plan was already reflected in the early *Shinden* style architecture. Figure 10 provides a comparison of an incomplete *Shinden* style architecture and *Shoin* architecture. The ‘centre’ of architecture, room of *shinden*

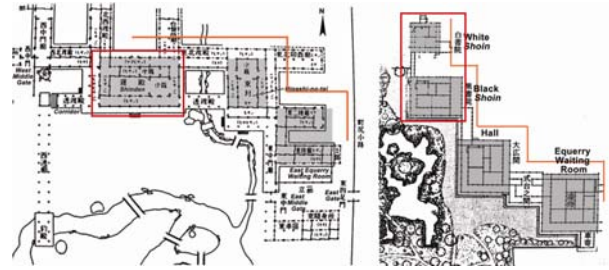


Figure 10. Comparison of ‘centre’ location in Japanese *Shinden* and *Shoin* style architecture

and room of *shoin*, was placed in the rear and approaches from the front door to the back were tortuous. Meanwhile, the plan of Japanese townhouse, *Machiya* also situated the ‘centre’, *zashiki* in the rear of the house; however, rooms were not arranged along zigzag patterns due to the limited site.

The sensory of “Oku” in Chinese traditional architecture is enriched by means of contradistinctions of different character courtyards; while in Japanese traditional architecture, the concept of “Oku” is expressed through the tortuous approach to the ‘centre’ of architecture.

6. CONCLUSION

The concept of “Oku” is an internal and mental spatial experience which can be expressed both in two-dimension paper and three-dimension space. The sense of “Oku” is realized by means of creating vacancy and multi-layers and also the flexuous approach to “Oku” and spatial contradistinctions are efficient ways to enrich the sensory ‘depth’.

“Oku” is a planar concept, is it possible to explore concept of “Oku” in a vertical level? In the populous China, exploring the vertical “Oku” may be a new way for filling up the gulf between tradition and modern.

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