

# *A Comparative Study on the Rationale of Garden Building between Jiangnan and Lingnan Gardens—Take Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden and Guangzhou's Yuyinshanfang as Examples*

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**Abstract:** Due to significant differences in geographical environments, social and cultural contexts, climatic conditions, and historical heritage, Jiangnan and Lingnan regions have developed their own unique styles of local gardens. This article examines Suzhou's classical garden, the Humble Administrator's Garden, and Guangzhou's Lingnan garden, Yu Yin Shan Fang, as representative examples. It provides a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between the two gardens in terms of gardening conditions, techniques for shaping mountains and water, spatial organization and layout, and the creation of aesthetic moods. The goal is to foster a comprehensive understanding of Jiangnan and Lingnan gardens while exploring the mutual borrowing and influence of the two styles in terms of garden construction concepts and methods. Ultimately, this analysis aims to contribute to the promotion of the inheritance and development of garden art.

## 1. Preface

Jiangnan private gardens and Lingnan gardens are significant representatives of the diverse local styles of traditional Chinese gardens. Jiangnan gardens are renowned for their emphasis on "materialization" and "empathy," reflecting a harmonious relationship between the natural and the man-made. In contrast, Lingnan gardens are distinguished by their unique blend of "East and West" and the concept of "for my use." This integration of Chinese and Western gardening philosophies highlights the practical and adaptable nature of Lingnan gardens. The Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou and the Yuyin Mountain House in Guangzhou exemplify the garden styles of Jiangnan and Lingnan, respectively. Both gardens exhibit a clear tendency toward the cultural characteristics of "artistic" and "pragmatic," yet they have evolved within different historical contexts of Chinese gardening. While they learn from and influence each other, their differences are evident in various gardening elements, such as the layering of mountains and water. This paper analyzes the comparison between Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden and Guangzhou's Yuyin Mountain House across multiple aspects of gardening. It explores the differences and commonalities between Jiangnan and Lingnan gardens through the lens of gardening theory and methodology.

## 2. Comparison of historical and cultural backgrounds of gardening

Jiangnan private gardens primarily refer to the well-preserved classical private gardens from the Ming and Qing dynasties, mainly located in southern Jiangsu, northern Zhejiang, and surrounding areas. During these dynasties, the region experienced a gardening boom influenced by natural, economic, and cultural factors. From a social perspective, since the Southern Song Dynasty, Jiangnan has been a gathering place for powerful merchants and scholars who possessed considerable manpower and financial resources, as well as elevated expectations for quality of life. The construction of gardens reflects a cultural phenomenon that requires not only economic and material resources but also significant human factors. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial examination system played a crucial role in selecting talent. Many Jiangnan scholars who succeeded in the exams and moved to Beijing often returned home when faced with challenges in officialdom. They sought solace by building private gardens, which served as a projection of the ancient literati spirit in response to reality. The Suzhou Humble Administrator's Garden embodies this intention, as it reflects a simple lifestyle intertwined with agricultural practices: "Irrigating the garden and selling vegetables for daily meals... this is also the policy of the humble." Jiangnan's cultural philosophy has profoundly influenced the traditional art of garden construction in the region. Local Taoist beliefs and foreign Buddhist thoughts permeated the minds of literati scholars, fostering a desire for seclusion and tranquility. They sought to create peaceful retreats amidst the bustling world, cultivating an appreciation for flowers, trees, landscapes, and rocks (as shown in Figure 1).

Lingnan gardens refer to the gardens located in the Lingnan region of China, reflecting the living habits of the local people. These gardens are predominantly built by merchants in the area and are often integrated with residential spaces. Since the establishment of the South Vietnam trade routes, Lingnan has engaged in maritime trade. The opening of the "Maritime Silk Road" during the Han Dynasty, and the subsequent development of Guangzhou as China's only trading port during the Ming and Qing dynasties, marked the beginning of significant economic growth and cultural prosperity in the region. This period also fostered an openness to the world, characterized by liberalism, democracy, pragmatism, and innovation. The cultural development of Lingnan gardens has been shaped by various influences, including Confucianism, Taoism, mercantilism, and Western thought. These influences have significantly impacted the aesthetic concepts, design, and layout techniques of modern Lingnan gardens. The Yuyin Mountain House in Guangzhou exemplifies this integration, showcasing the unique rhythmic characteristics of Cantonese culture while embodying the regional cultural essence of Lingnan gardens, which are known for their compatibility, openness, and innovation (as shown in Figure 2).



Figure 1: The Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou from: Pacific Photography Blog (Left)

Figure 2: Yuyinshanfang in Guangzhou from: Pacific Photography Blog (Right)

### 3. Landscape water management

In Jiangnan gardens, water often serves as the central natural element, typically taking the form of a main pool that acts as the visual focus of the garden. Water is a crucial component of the landscape, and its varied forms create rich water features. Through the use of water technology and artistic scenes, these gardens illustrate the concepts of source and flow, mirroring the natural world with the adage that "water has a source to flow." The Humble Administrator's Garden in Suzhou exemplifies the beauty of Jiangnan gardens, showcasing a variety of water forms. The spatial arrangement of water within the garden is particularly noteworthy: the central water body runs through the entire garden, featuring three horizontal and two vertical streams, along with five smaller waterways. This design creates a crystal-like space renowned for its openness and depth. In contrast, the western section of the garden features a different configuration, with one horizontal and two vertical water axes. The axial relationships established by the water system play a significant role in organizing the attractions and forming spatial connections throughout the garden's layout. This integration culminates in a classical garden pattern characterized by a cohesive water system that traverses the entire space (as shown in Figure 3).

Lingnan garden water management techniques, influenced by regional materials, economic conditions, and foreign factors, have developed a distinctive style. Typically, Lingnan gardens feature geometric, regular pools designed to conserve land and minimize rain damage, often constructed with stone banks.

Due to the relatively small water areas in Lingnan gardens, designers frequently employ creative water management techniques to enhance the perception of space. In terms of spatial form, the water treatment in Yuyin Mountain House presents an aggregated water body. The garden is divided into eastern and western sections by a veranda arch bridge. The western courtyard features a square pond, while the eastern courtyard contains an octagonal water pool that is positioned perpendicularly to the square pond, both aligned along a central axis (as shown in Figure 3).

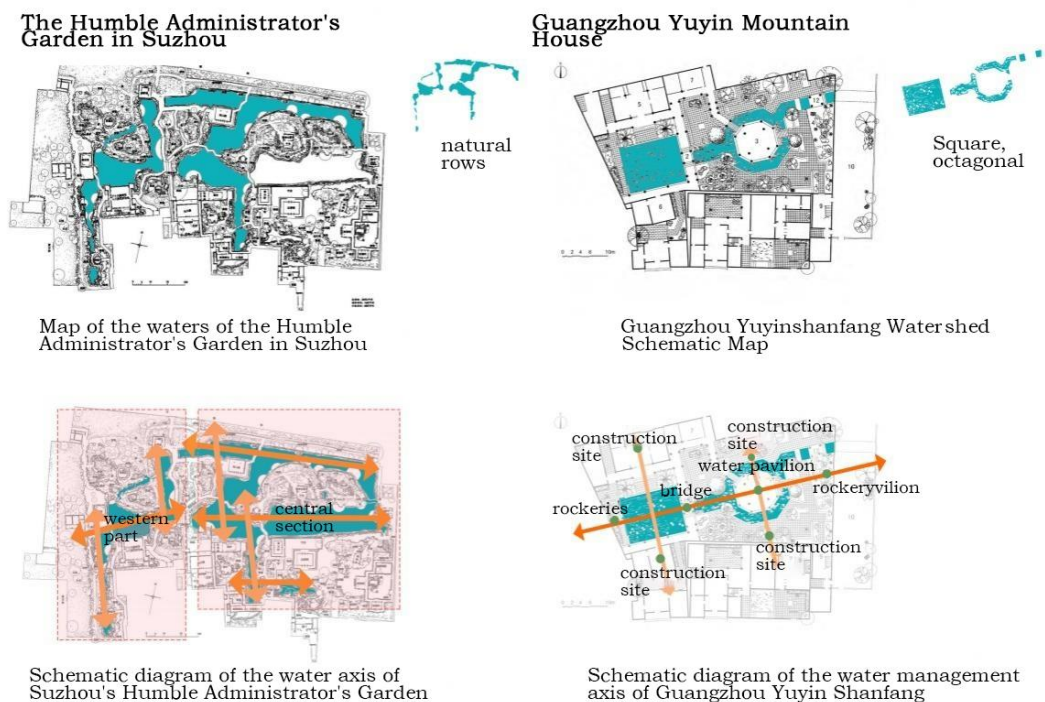


Figure 3: Schematic diagrams of water management in Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden and Guangzhou's Yuyinshanfang (Self-drawn)

#### 4. Spatial organisation

Jiangnan private gardens are often situated in urban areas, where their owners seek the convenience of proximity to their homes, albeit at the cost of a secluded natural atmosphere. To create a sense of tranquility amidst the urban environment, city gardens often employ courtyard walls as boundaries, enclosing a relatively private internal space. However, to enhance the spatial experience of the garden and strengthen the connection between the garden and its external surroundings, designers frequently utilize the technique of "borrowed scenery." This approach allows them to incorporate views from outside the garden, encapsulated in the saying, "the common is screened, the precious is collected." In Suzhou's ancient city, the North Pagoda Temple is located to the west of the Humble Administrator's Garden. The garden's layout cleverly incorporates this pagoda, creating a visual connection that forms a deep viewing line towards the temple, referred to as "wu zhu yu jiu." This design not only expands the spatial perception of the courtyard but also enhances the sense of depth in the landscape, reinforcing the connection between the house garden and its external environment. Within the garden itself, various viewing techniques—such as opposite views, barrier views, and framed views—are employed in the spatial composition. The overall layout of the Humble Administrator's Garden is intentionally complex, making it challenging to identify a clear and definite tour route or sequence of landscape spaces. This approach aims to convey a sense of depth within a limited area, creating a unique landscape garden experience that invites exploration and contemplation.

Lingnan gardens are typically surrounded by buildings, creating a defined garden space that prioritizes functionality over scale and form, catering to the needs of daily life. The layout of Guangzhou's Yuyin Mountain House, for example, draws inspiration from Jiangnan garden artistry. The overall design is both dexterous and exquisite, employing gardening techniques such as "hidden but not exposed" and "shrinking the dragon into an inch" to create a space that feels both deep and expansive. Within the garden, a variety of features coexist harmoniously, including pavilions, bridges, winding paths, corridors, rocks, and ponds. This rich diversity contributes to the garden's dynamic atmosphere. Despite these influences, Yuyin Mountain House retains the distinctive spatial characteristics of Lingnan gardens, characterized by a vertical landscape axis and a "cross" pattern formed by the water system. The surrounding buildings complement this design, creating a one-to-one landscape relationship that enhances the vertical spatial pattern (as shown in Figure 4).

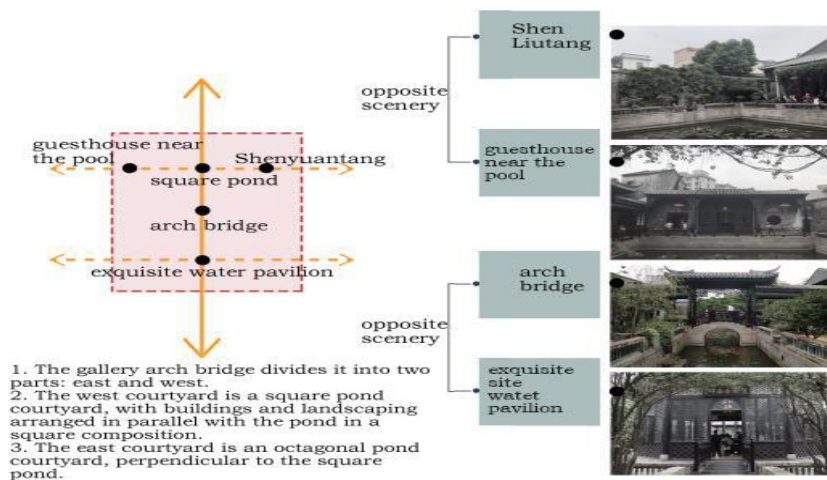
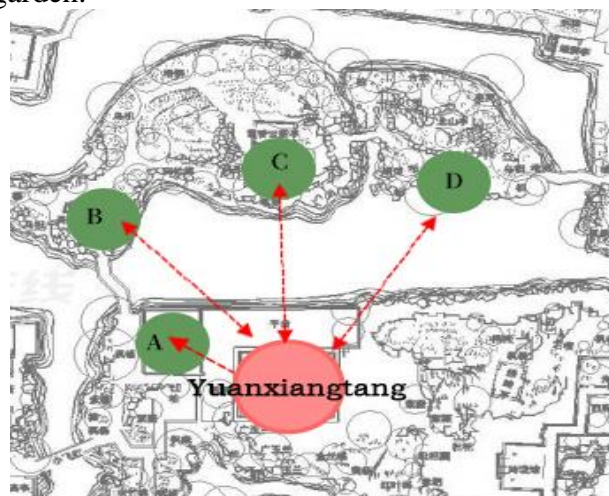


Figure 4: Schematic diagram of the spatial organisation of Yuyinshanfang in Guangzhou  
 Self-drawn

## 5. Esthetic conception

Jiangnan private gardens were primarily designed and constructed by the scholar class, including literati and painters, reflecting profound philosophical thinking and artistic interests. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties, this scholarly class has increasingly pursued unique interests within confined spaces, aspiring to embody the concept of "a pot in the world" and even the realm of "mustard seed Nasuya." The phrase "sending love to the landscape" captures the primary intent behind these gardens, as they seek comfort and solace through the experience of nature. In creating their gardens, gardeners often project their subjective emotions onto landscapes that initially lack thoughts, feelings, or consciousness. This transfer of emotion aims to evoke resonance through the arrangement of flowers, trees, and various landscape vignettes.

The Humble Administrator's Garden, as a representative of Jiangnan gardens, possesses significant artistic value in creating mood. The central and western parts of the garden feature a rich variety of attractions that visually delight visitors, offering a "poetic and pictorial" experience. This is achieved through the strategic naming of scenes and the use of plaques, which contribute to an intriguing and evocative poetic atmosphere. For example, the hall named Yuanxiangtang draws its title from a line in Zhou Dunyi's poem "I Love Lotus" from the Song Dynasty: "The fragrance is far away, and it is good to be clear." This reference enhances the spatial experience by connecting the beauty of the plants with the poetic citation, establishing Yuanxiangtang as a visual focal point within the garden (as shown in Figure 5). The mood in Jiangnan gardens is not solely based on material spatial forms; it also arises from a sense of "empathy." This concept involves a mental landscape that reproduces associations and imaginations triggered by the scenery, enriching the overall experience of the garden.



a: Yiyu Xuan; b: Lotus Breeze; c: Xuexiang Yunwei Pavilion; d: Beishan Pavilion

Figure 5: Relationships of attractions around Yuanxiangtang

Lingnan gardens embody a distinct aesthetic mood characterized by "pragmatism," differing from the "euphony" found in Jiangnan gardens, which represent an organic synthesis of various elements. In Lingnan gardens, there is a strong emphasis on harmonizing the garden with its natural environment, highlighting the integration and proximity of the garden to its surroundings.

The gardening practices of Lingnan gardeners were influenced by mercantile ideas and the commodity economy, leading to a focus on aesthetic concepts such as "the use of things" and the "integration of Chinese and Western" styles (as shown in Figure 6). This approach emphasizes the artistic effects achieved through the combination of architecture, decoration, landscape vignettes, and vegetation.

The cultural connotations influencing the spatial intentions of Yuyin Mountain House include marine culture, Confucian culture, pragmatic culture, and open culture. The garden's design is primarily architectural, consisting of various structures such as halls, pavilions, bridges, and corridors, including the Walnut Hall, Deep Willow Hall, Farewell Pool Hall, Corridor Bridge, Linglong Water Pavilion, and Laixian Pavilion. The spine and side walls of the garden serve as key decorative elements, symbolizing the aspirations of the community and reflecting the gardener's hopes for future generations. The garden's design may also be influenced by Wu Bin, the garden's owner, who served in Beijing; this connection suggests an alignment with the characteristics of gardens in the south of the Yangtze River. The names of the garden's features express the owner's expectations for his descendants. For example, "Deep Willow Hall" derives its name from a line in the poem by Tang poet Liu Shenxu, which reads, "closed to the mountain road, the deep willows of the reading hall." Similarly, "Lin Chi Bei Guan," which serves as a guest residence, features a square pool that enhances the guest experience. The name "Lin Chi Bei Guan" further evokes the same poetic imagery, linking the garden to its literary and cultural heritage.

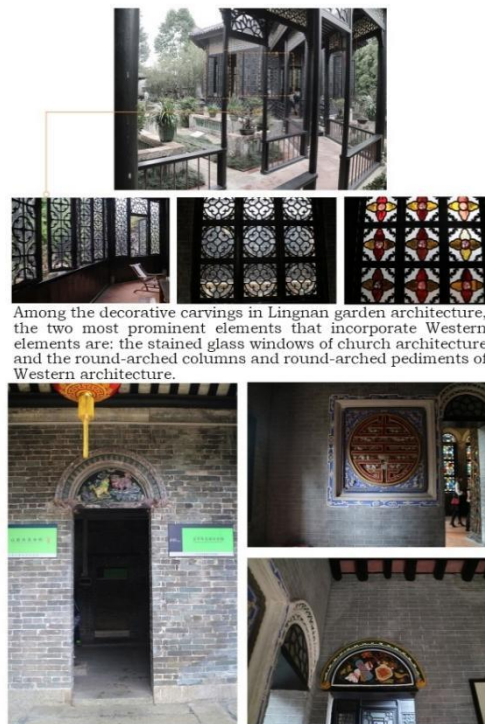


Figure 6: "East meets West" performance of Yuyinshanfang

## 6. Conclusions

The comparison of the gardening methods and artistic characteristics of Jiangnan and Lingnan gardens reveals a multi-layered relationship. While both share commonalities, they also exhibit distinct differences, each reflecting the inheritance and development of their own regional characteristics within the framework of traditional Chinese gardening. Both styles demonstrate a reverence for nature, a love of the natural world, and aesthetic interest. In examining Yuyin Mountain House, one can still find several gardening techniques and architectural symbols reminiscent of Jiangnan gardens, such as the wall-leaning structures and the Laixian Pavilion. However, the formation of each garden's style is influenced by a variety of objective and subjective factors, resulting from the interaction of numerous elements. The differences between the private gardens of Jiangnan and Lingnan are thus multifaceted, contributing to the development of regional

gardens that possess their own distinctive features. These variations not only enrich the gardening tradition but also enhance the cultural landscape of each region.

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