

# Inspiration of Taoist Thought and Culture on the “New Chinese Style” Landscape Design

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**How to cite this paper:** You, C. Y., & Mai, X. M. (2019). Inspiration of Taoist Thought and Culture on the “New Chinese Style” Landscape Design. *Art and Design Review*, 7, 68-77.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/adr.2019.72007>

**Received:** March 29, 2019

**Accepted:** May 13, 2019

**Published:** May 16, 2019

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## Abstract

It was the thousands of years of China history that gave birth to the excellent traditional ideology and culture, and in the long history the Chinese Taoism came into being and gave continuously influence and heritage. The philosophical thoughts of “let nature take its course” run through and influence all periods and fields, including the profound impact of Chinese traditional landscape closely related to nature, and the ideological pursuit of Taoist traditional culture reflected in Chinese traditional landscape. The Taoist ideological and cultural language endows the garden art with unique spiritual connotation, and the garden art endows the symbolic meaning of the essence of Taoist ideology and culture to everything, they interact with each other and develop in harmony. Therefore, this paper proposes to express spiritual culture with natural pattern in the new Chinese landscape design, explores the symbolic design expression of traditional landscape under the influence of Taoist ideology and culture, and applies it to the new Chinese landscape design to find the design ideas with spiritual connotation while inheriting the traditional ideology and culture.

## Keywords

Taoist Thoughts, Traditional Landscape, New Chinese Style Landscape, The Union of Heaven and Human Beings, Water Benefits Everything in the World But Never Contends Its Own Contribution, The Greatest Virtue Being Like Water-Good for Everything

## 1. Introduction

Taoist thoughts and culture conveyed the meaning of origin from nature and conformity to nature with the saying “human from the nature; heaven from the nature equally” (Zhuangzi, 369-286 BCE) to “or I am abstracted from the world,

the world from nature, nature from the way, and the way from what is beneath abstraction” (Laozi, *The Spring and Autumn Period*). From the perspective of landscape art, “the union of heaven and human beings” emphasized in this traditional thought and culture is consistent with the principle of “reappeared natural style” in traditional landscape. The cultural embodiment and symbolic significance of Taoist traditional thought in traditional landscape bring itself with natural beauty, as well as the artistic conception. Therefore, from the linguistic perspective of Taoist traditional thoughts and culture, basing on the analysis of landscape design tracing from the traditional to the new Chinese stylish and the summarization of the existing research, this paper makes an analysis on traditional landscape with the summarization of its design methods and ideological essence, and puts forward that traditional landscape embodying the traditional thoughts and culture should be interpreted and applied in the new Chinese style landscape design to realize the heritage of ideology and culture and the innovation of design art, including the artistic techniques of advocating natural beauty and pursuing the simple, elegant spirit embodied in the new Chinese Style landscape design.

In China, with the vigorous development of cities and information technology, people not only attach importance to the functionality and practicability of the environment, but also pay more attention to the higher spiritual pursuit. Designers also pay more attention to cultural heritage and innovative expression. With the generation of new Chinese landscape design in the long history, it tries to express the spiritual connotation of traditional Chinese landscape in the language of contemporary landscape design.

From the Taoist ideological and cultural words, this paper surveys the artistic expression of traditional Chinese landscape on nature, explores the influence of Taoist thoughts on garden art and skillfully integrates modern aesthetics with the Taoist traditional ideas of “the union of heaven and human beings”, “Water benefits everything in the world but never contends its own contribution” and “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything”. This paper proposes to seek inspiration from nature and create landscape design endowed with cultural essence with the prerequisite that the functional requirement and visual aesthetics of modern people are satisfied, so that the artistic characteristics of Chinese Taoist ideology and culture will be inherited and embodied in the new Chinese landscape design. Furthermore, it proposes that under the influence of traditional ideology and culture, the symbolism of traditional “garden art” should be interpreted and applied in the new Chinese landscape design.

## 2. Basic Overview

The landscape design are developed and inherited continuously in the advancement of the times, with an active and changeable stance, it adapts to the requirement of the society. Regarding to the development, which is defined in *Initial Analysis on Humanistic Performance of Landscape Symbolism*, “Advance-

ment is not to abandon the past, but to integrate the old and the new, to show the old culture with new ideas” (Zhang, 2016). About the inheritance, which is mentioned in *Study on the Impact of Traditional Landscape on Modern Urban Landscape*, “the impact of history on modern is profound, essential, and recessive, which requires us to source the root of this impact and develop the new ideas” (Chen, 2006). Facing with the development of new Chinese style landscape design, from the historical perspective of Chinese traditional culture, we will excavate the cultural root of traditional landscape, analyze the cultural essence and artistic expression, and propose the design expression of new Chinese landscape with cultural connotations.

## 2.1. Traditional Chinese Style Landscape

“As the mother of world gardens, China has a long history of gardening” (Xiong, 2010). It is unique in the history of World Gardening art. It also shows that “the constant development and innovation will lead the garden art into mature” (Xiong, 2010). In this procedure, Chinese traditional gardens have become an important carrier of traditional culture, which gets the traditional culture developed and inherited.

### 2.1.1. Basic Principle

Regarding “reappeared natural landscape style” as the basic principle, Chinese traditional landscape is applied to beautify the living environment with the ingenious design using natural things such as rocks, flowers and trees etc. (Chen, 2001) which makes it come true, to create art in nature and reflect the interaction and respect between human and nature in the meantime the nature endowed with aesthetic value, so as to achieve the harmony between human and nature, and jointly create the landscape complying with nature.

### 2.1.2. Important Carrier

The Chinese traditional culture has a long history and is enduring. The traditional Chinese landscape with traditional significance has always been an important carrier of Chinese traditional culture. As Xiong Yao said in *Study on the Impact of Traditional Landscape on Modern Urban Landscape*, “In a certain sense, Chinese Landscape History is a Chinese History, because Chinese traditional landscape is not only a simple living space, but also a carrier of Chinese history and culture” (Xiong, 2010), and mentioned in *Symbolism of Chinese Classical Gardens*, “Chinese traditional gardens create a beautiful physical environment and become one of the spiritual symbols and important carriers of Chinese culture with their unique aesthetics, profound cultural connotation, specific format language and structure elements” (Wang, 2009), which conveys the understanding and pursuit of culture and nature, just as Mr. Yu Kongjian of Peking University said, “Landscape is a symbol, an imprint of nature and human social processes on the earth, and a book on human social history and natural system” (Yu, 2006). The traditional culture is emerged from the history of hu-

man society and is inherited and created by the symbol of landscape in natural system.

## 2.2. New Chinese Style Landscape Design

Ever Marx said that “Man make their own history, but they do not make it as they please, they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx & Engels, 1995). Bacon, a famous American architect, said: “Every generation must redefine the old creed passed down from the previous generation, and must re-elaborate the old concept from a contemporary perspective systematically” (Bacon, 2003). For this reason, the relevant scholars have analyzed the “conditions inherited from the past”: focusing on the tradition defined in *Modern Significance of Traditional Chinese Gardens*, it said that “modern landscape takes nature as the main body, in which the natural elements come first, it is the main elements of gardening cannot be neglected, or the gardens will lose their lives” (Xiong, 2010). Once again it’s mentioned in *New Chinese-style Landscape Design Based on Semiotics theory*, “The essence of traditional Chinese gardening thought: the gardening thought of advocating nature and investigating the beauty of natural landscapes” (Liu, 2012). In view of innovation, it is put forward in *“New Chinese” Landscape Design—A Case of Nanjing Fuzimiao Street Landscape Renovation, Forestry Science And Technology*, “Integrating traditional culture into modern design language and injecting modern space with the classical charm of Chinese traditional culture, aiming at the new Chinese landscape, we see a landscape environment full of cultural connotations created for modern people’s aesthetics by combining modern elements with traditional elements through the understanding of traditional culture, which not only makes traditional art properly embodied in today’s society, but also makes residents feel the broad and profound traditional culture” (Li et al., 2011). Again it is mentioned in *New Chinese-style Landscape Design Based on Semiotics theory*, “new Chinese Landscape meets the upgrading aesthetics of modern people and enables people to understand the meaning of traditional Chinese culture in the modern environment while appreciating the landscape” (Liu, 2012). The above research points out the value of the new Chinese landscape based on tradition and re-creation.

Based on the above reviews, the analysis shows that: New Chinese landscape design is a modern design method evolved from traditional gardens through continuous exploration on artistic expression and cultural connotation of traditional Chinese gardens, instead of a real definition given by scholars and designers, so as to endow traditional design with modern aesthetic art form and innovate it from the perspective of modern aesthetics, combining with the requirement of modern functions, and learn the artistic conception of traditional gardens in specific landscaping techniques. At the same time, we should always adhere to the harmonious beauty of traditional Chinese gardens, advocate the hu-

man creation based on nature, and realize the connotation of “The union of heaven and human beings”.

### **3. Design Expression**

#### **3.1. Design Principle Based on “The Union of Heaven and Human Beings”**

The “union of heaven and human beings” in Taoist ideology and culture is permeated at every period of Chinese landscape art, from the traditional “view of nature” to the “landscape city” pursued by modern society, as stated in the *Research of Artistic Elements in Contemporary Chinese Urban Landscape Design*, “The road Chinese people matching on is a harmony to nature” (Lu, 2011). Therefore, in view of the current situation and future expectations of the new Chinese landscape design, this paper proposes to grasp the basic principles of traditional gardens, adhering to the design expression “reappeared natural style”, to achieve “The union of heaven and human beings” of the new Chinese landscape design basing on the Taoist traditional culture of “originating from nature, integrating with nature”. According to observation, the natural planting in urban landscape design is greatly reduced caused by the land utilization ratio. On the premise of meeting the functional requirements, the maximization of natural landscape has become the ideal of “modern people”, especially the environment for people’s living and relaxation, that is to ensure the optimization of natural conditions on the basis of the normative and functional requirements are well met. To ensure the proportion of natural landscape such as mountain and water in natural landscape space, so that under the influence of traditional Chinese ideology and culture, the new Chinese landscape design will not only inherit the basic principle of “reappeared landscape” in traditional Chinese gardens, but also realize the “harmony and unity of human and nature”. Then the idea of “human and nature co-exist in harmony” in Taoist culture will be interpreted and realized.

#### **3.2. Symbolism of “Water Benefits Everything in the World But Never Contends Its Own Contribution”**

The Taoist ideology and culture in China have an immeasurable influence on traditional Chinese gardens. “The union of heaven and human beings” embodies the ideological pursuit of harmony between human and nature, and the unity of all things; and the “water”, the origin of nature is endowed with the spiritual connotation of nourishing all things but not competing with all things by the words “Water benefits everything in the world but never contends its own contribution”. From nature to the natural elements, based on the inherent meaning expressed through Taoist ideology and culture, the traditional Chinese landscape is given a soul and a symbolic meaning.

In Taoist thoughts “Water benefits everything in the world but never contends its own contribution” endows water with the symbolic meaning of “blood of all things”, linked with all things in the world, or in dynamic or in static, gentle but

full of strength, which shows a kind of pure, lofty, vivid, and sweet character (Wang, 2014). Such symbolic natural landscape plays a pivotal role in the promotion of human spiritual world and the development of human civilization (Dong et al., 2014). Meanwhile, tracing back to the traditional Chinese culture, we will excavate the natural symbolism endowed by traditional culture, create symbolic design expression with the combination of traditional landscape art and traditional ideology, apply it to the new Chinese landscape design, and realize deep artistic value while reflecting the natural beauty, artistic beauty and conceptual beauty of traditional landscape. As mentioned in *Symbolic Art and Royal Garden*, “Symbolic design is one of the design methods commonly used in environmental landscape art works, an important means to reflect the artistic value of works” (Zhang, 2009). In this paper, the symbolic design expression excavated in the traditional ideology and culture not only carries forward the excellent traditional culture of China, but also endows the new Chinese landscape design with cultural connotation, so as to improve the taste and significance of landscape art.

### 3.3. Artistic Conception of “The Greatest Virtue Being Like Water, Good for Everything”

In Taoist ideology and culture “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything” gave the essence of “water” a metaphor of “virtue” in the highest realm, hoping that human beings will be as lofty, charitable, tolerant and gentle as “water”, and the symbolic meaning of this traditional thoughts has been prevailed till now, affecting the thoughts and virtues of generations of Chinese people. However, in today’s society, accompanying with the fierce competition increasingly and the increased pressure day by day, there is less moment to enjoy the “water” like pure land in mind and body in gentle and tender, to be as hard as the rock. Therefore, inspired by the design on objectives, elements, principles and methods proposed for new Chinese landscape, based on the understanding of the traditional Taoist thoughts of “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything”, this paper blends the design inspiration into the new Chinese landscape by using symbolic design expression to create a “pure land” endowed with the spirit and artistic conception of traditional culture.

#### 3.3.1. “Greatest” Means “Nobility”

Based on the understanding of “The Greatest Virtue Being Like Water, Good for Everything” in Taoist ideology and culture, this paper interprets the “Greatest” with a meaning of “Nobility”. It combines the spiritual connotation of traditional ideology and culture with the construction of traditional landscape art to propose the design objectives including the creation of a lofty life and the comfortable nature in “New Chinese Style” landscape through the exploration of Chinese traditional culture and landscape art.

##### 1) Artistic Life in Nobility

Wang Changling, in the Chinese Tang Dynasty, who put forward the word

“artistic conception” in the aesthetic category. In *Study on Classical Chinese Garden* by Zhou Weiquan, it says that “artistic conception is an extremely important aesthetic category in the creation and appreciation of Chinese art, as the highest realm of Chinese traditional aesthetics” (Zhou, 2010). There are the words in the *Reappearance of landscape—Study on the Possibility from landscape painting to “landscape city”* by Chu Dong, who put forward that artistic conception is the ultimate goal pursued by Chinese artistic works in the history of ancient Chinese aesthetics (Chu, 2012), and therefore, there is still tremendous challenges we have to face for the creation of artistic conception in the contemporary landscape art. With the continuous development of the times, urban positioning has become an important criterion to measure the value of housing, ignoring the yearning for the natural environment and the creation of the artistic conception of life. Hence the pursuing of the natural environment of “the union of heaven and human beings” and creating the artistic conception of “The Greatest Virtue being like water, Good for Everything”, which is the ideal life while far to reach in nowadays. In view of the current situation, this paper proposes that the spiritual connotation of traditional ideas and the symbolic art of traditional landscape should be integrated into the new Chinese landscape design to improve people’s artistic life.

## 2) Natural Landscape in Gentle

“Nature”, it is not only the embodiment of Taoist thoughts or the objectives of future landscape design, but also the indispensable soul since the origin of all things, and the persistent principle of landscape art. At present, with the improvement of material conditions, a large number of people poured into the city. Facing the lack of natural environment, the “happiness” of contemporary urban people can only be satisfied in information technology, failed to be obtained from nature. Basing on the current situation, the new Chinese style landscape design should build a natural landscape environment within the limited urban space so as to bring the people, who enjoy in the comfortable and natural landscape with the enjoyment of the natural flavor of modern life and the sense of belonging and satisfaction from the living environment.

### 3.3.2. “Virtue” in Supreme

The theory “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything” from Taoist ideology and culture, it regards “Virtue” as the expectation of human character and the treatment to all things in kindness and purity, which embodies the spiritual connotation of traditional ideology and culture, and matches its spiritual connotation with the characteristics of natural plants by using symbolic techniques in traditional Chinese landscape, as what is said in *On Symbolic Design in the Art of Environmental Landscape* “Environmental Landscape is one of the material carriers symbolized art” (Yang, 2005). Therefore, in view of the new Chinese landscape design, symbolic art is used to endow plants with the spiritual connotation of traditional culture, so that their symbolic meaning may create a landscape artistic conception, and enhance the appeal of landscape art (Li & Li, 2014), embodied in

the landscape design as design elements, by which conveying excellent traditional culture and humanistic spirit (Zhang, 2016).

Simple plants, in the convention of traditional Chinese culture, are endowed with a tough and lofty character (Liu, 2012). Taking plants as design elements of artistic conception construction to express the positive spiritual connotation, which enables people have the spiritual pursuit for “kept myself awake to watch the dizzy world”, being like the natural elements such as lotus and bamboo in plants. The lotus symbolizes the supreme virtue and pure spiritual connotation with the noble character of “grows up in the mud, but with no dirt on” (Zhou, Song Dynasty), growing in mud but not polluted by it. Such a symbolic meaning is deeply embodied in the essence of Chinese traditional ideology and culture. The bamboo symbolizes the spiritual connotation of uprightness and modesty with the noble sentiment of “No matter where it is planted, it always adapts” (Liu, Tang Dynasty). Bamboos are both with rigidity and softness as gentlemen, they are used to symbolize the pursuit of noble and upright personality wherever and whenever they are. Applying the design elements with symbolic art into the “New Chinese Style” landscape design, it fully embodies the ideological connotation of Chinese traditional culture, creates the artistic life of “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything”, and inherits the basic principle of “reappear nature” and the spiritual connotation of “the union of heaven and human beings” in traditional Chinese landscape. Therefore, in view of the “New Chinese” landscape design, we should pay attention to the embodiment of the internal symbolic art with natural elements and the external aesthetic feeling, to present a landscape design with cultural connotation and natural beauty.

### 3.3.3. “Ruo (Being Like)” Means Being Tolerant

Based on the understanding of the Taoist thoughts “The Greatest Virtue Being Like Water, Good for Everything”, this paper defines the word “Being like” with the meaning of tolerance. Laozi’s advocacy of “The Way from what is Beneath Abstraction” embodies the respect of traditional ideology and culture for “nature”, with the expectation for the conformity of human beings with the original laws of all things, kept the basic principle of “accustom to nature”. Chinese traditional culture has a profound influence on Chinese art, which has acquired a real philosophical basis and provided a correct direction for Chinese landscape design. Therefore, in the “New Chinese” landscape design, the term “adaptation” is always applied in landscape design, whether it is the plant itself fitting the theory “act according to circumstances, survival of the fittest” or the landscape environment created by human beings, to face different regional, natural and climatic conditions, the corresponding natural plant configuration is carried out to explore the natural expression that adapts to the right time and places, implement the landscape in sustainable development.

### 3.3.4. “Water” in Tender

“The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything” in Taoist thoughts

endows “water” with the meaning of tenderness. The natural characteristic of “easy to be integrated and easy to integrate inversely” plays a vital role in landscape design as a natural element, integrated it into the new Chinese style landscape design, the modern buildings will be connected with the natural environment, to create a modern urban space with static and dynamic images, increasing life vigor in addition.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Chinese Taoist ideology and culture gave far-reaching influence on landscape design. Based on the cultural base of Taoist ideology, this paper puts forward some opinions on the expression of new Chinese style landscape design. Firstly, it explores the Taoist ideology of “the union of heaven and human beings” applied in traditional Chinese landscape by summarizing the research findings of many scholars to propose that the new Chinese landscape design will be applied to seek reappearance of the design expression on nature in the process of development, and integrates the traditional ideology and culture into the new Chinese landscape design for future inheritance and creation. Secondly, the study is based on the influence of Taoist ideology and culture in traditional Chinese landscape and the symbolic design expression in Taoist culture language. Finally, based on the interpretation of the “The Greatest Virtue being Like water, Good for Everything” for Taoist ideology, this paper is for the search of the spiritual connotation and symbolic design elements in traditional culture, to make the “new Chinese” landscape design meet the requirement of modern function and aesthetics, accompanying with profound artistic value and spiritual connotation. Anyway there are still some imperfections about the personal opinions on the expression of new Chinese landscape design in this paper, which requires the joint and constant exploration and research with researchers and designers in the process of continuous urban development and artistic innovation to create a noble artistic conception of life and a comfortable natural landscape, and make great effort for the acceleration of the realization of the artistic ideal of “Pure Land” in the city.

#### **Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant number: 51508484) and this project is funded by the graduate innovative scientific research project (grant number: CX2019SZ07) of southwest university for nationalities.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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