

The Construction Logic and Contemporary Translation of the Caoxi Temple Landscape from the Perspective of Zen Aesthetics

Guanwei Zheng¹, Rong Bao^{1*}

¹ College of Art and Design, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming, China

Email Address

1722598917@qq.com (Guanwei Zheng), 21772016@qq.com (Rong Bao)

*Correspondence: 21772016@qq.com

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Abstract:

Zen aesthetics, as a quintessential essence of traditional Chinese culture, possesses profound philosophical connections with the art of garden making. This study takes the Caoxi Temple in Yunnan as a case study to explore the expression and practical logic of Zen aesthetics within its landscape architecture. Through literature review and field investigation, it analyzes the expression of Zen concepts found in the temple's spatial layout, architectural forms, and plant configuration. The research finds that Caoxi Temple interprets the Zen aesthetic pursuit of “not establishing words, directly pointing to the human mind” through its “empty and tranquil” mountain-water composition, its “sudden enlightenment”-oriented landscape sequence, and its application of “natural” materials. In contemporary landscape design, its aesthetic principles of “simplicity and austerity” and “subtlety and implicitness” provide modern gardens with traditional wisdom for reference, offering potential pathways for the contemporary innovation of traditional garden art.

Keywords:

Zen Aesthetics, Caoxi Temple Landscape, Construction Logic, Contemporary Translation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Zen aesthetics, with its unique philosophical connotations, has profoundly influenced traditional garden construction [1]. With the increasing contemporary pursuit of spiritual spaces, the concepts of “simplicity/austerity” and “emptiness/tranquility” in Zen aesthetics provide significant ideological resources for modern landscape design. The Yunnan Caoxi Temple, serving as a paradigm combining Zen culture and garden art, demonstrates Zen expression within its construction logic, embodying traditional gardening wisdom and holding inspirational significance for the cultural inheritance and innovation of contemporary environmental design.

Zen aesthetics emphasizes the intuitive experience of “directly pointing to the human mind,” which manifests in garden spaces as the pursuit of natural authenticity. Caoxi Temple constructs layers of artistic conception that transcend form through its “empty and tranquil” landscape composition and its “sudden enlightenment”-oriented spatial sequence, enabling viewers to attain physical and mental resonance. Researching the garden construction logic of Caoxi Temple constitutes an exploration into the modern transformation of Chinese aesthetics.

1.2. Research Significance

This study holds multidimensional academic significance and social value. Theoretically, by analyzing the Caoxi Temple case, it systematically clarifies the intrinsic relationship between Zen aesthetics and garden art, addressing the gap between theory and practice found in existing research [2]. Practically, the study confronts two major contradictions in contemporary landscape design: spatial homogenization and the diminishment of regional characteristics caused by urbanization, and the imbalance between material function and spiritual needs.

The Caoxi Temple case demonstrates that Zen aesthetics, through “simple and austere” spatial organization and the use of “natural” materials, satisfies practical needs while simultaneously creating spiritual places possessing cultural depth. The Zen view of nature, “the unity of heaven and human,” aligns with contemporary ecological design principles. Caoxi Temple’s selection of native plants and its minimal intervention in the terrain exemplify the wisdom of respecting ecological authenticity [3].

2. The Correlation Between Zen Aesthetics and Landscape Architecture

2.1. Core Concepts: Emptiness/Tranquility, Impermanence, and Non-Duality

The core ideas of Zen aesthetics are crystallized into three major concepts: “emptiness/tranquility,” “impermanence,” and “non-duality,” which profoundly shape the aesthetic orientation and spatial logic of traditional gardens [4].

Emptiness/Tranquility does not refer to physical vacancy, but rather signifies an aesthetic state of reaching spiritual freedom by dissolving formal constraints. Caoxi Temple interprets this concept through its sparse landscape layout and minimalist architecture, such as the white gravel courtyard and solitary ancient pines, achieving an increase in artistic conception through material “reduction,” thereby guiding viewers to comprehend infinite Zen meaning.

The concept of Impermanence permeates the dynamic construction of the garden. Caoxi Temple’s original use of natural materials and the temporal design of its landscape sequence transform the Buddhist philosophical tenet of “all conditioned phenomena are impermanent” into material carriers. Unlike Western gardens that pursue eternal symmetry, Zen gardens accept the aging of materials and the evolution of landscapes, making impermanence an integral part of the spatial narrative [5].

Non-Duality advocates transcending binary oppositions to point directly to the essence. In gardens, this is embodied as the unification of multiple dialectical relationships: the artificial and the natural are no longer separated, and techniques creating interplay between void and solid produce spatial layers that are “separated yet continuous.” In Caoxi Temple’s pavement design, regular stone slabs and irregular

pebbles are juxtaposed, stimulating contemplation of the Zen principle that “difference is equality” through material contrast [6].

2.2. Expression of Zen Aesthetics in Landscape Architecture

Zen aesthetics is primarily expressed in gardens through three aspects: spatial artistic conception, material application, and plant configuration.

Firstly, regarding spatial artistic conception, Zen gardens convey the beauty of “emptiness/tranquility” through blank leave and simplification. The courtyards of Caoxi Temple utilize large areas of pavement or water surfaces to create visual blank space, guiding viewers to perceive inner tranquility through extremely simple spatial organization [7]. The arrangement of the landscape sequence subtly corresponds to the idea of “sudden enlightenment,” with winding paths creating visual surprises reminiscent of “light glimpsed through willows and blossoms.”

Secondly, material selection advocates “natural non-action.” Caoxi Temple extensively uses unprocessed local materials: rubble walls retain natural textures, weathered wood reveals innate grain, displaying the philosophy of “impermanence” through the traces of time. Stepping stones serve both as path guides, and their irregular arrangement implies the Zen idea of “following conditions” [8].

Finally, plant configuration is the most concrete expressive carrier of Zen aesthetics. Caoxi Temple selects symbolic plants such as pine, bamboo, and plum, forming visual focal points through solitary or cluster planting [9]. Pine trees symbolize tenacity, the hollowness of bamboo suggests “no-self,” and plum blossoms blooming in the cold metaphorically represent transcendent enlightenment. The seasonal changes of plants become a vivid lesson on the “concept of impermanence” [10].

3. The Zen Construction Logic of Caoxi Temple Landscape

3.1. Space: Asymmetrical Layout and Narrative Beyond Convention

The garden of Caoxi Temple breaks with traditional axial symmetry, constructing a dynamically balanced Zen field through an asymmetrical layout (Figure 1). This layout is based on the natural topography, forming a spatial sequence that meets functional needs while concealing Zen meaning through the organic combination of architecture, rocks, and water bodies. Asymmetry manifests as a threefold design wisdom:



Figure 1. Model of Caoxi Temple.

First, a free layout conforming to the terrain. Built against the mountain, the main structures are distributed in a staggered manner according to the mountain slope,

forming non-linear spatial dialogues through winding stone steps, transforming the pilgrimage process into a spiritual journey of “gradual enlightenment” [11].

Second, the creative application of “narrative beyond convention.” Unconventional elements are placed at spatial turning points: diagonal stepping stones at right-angle turns, natural solitary rocks within regular courtyards, triggering contemplation of “non-duality” through visual contradiction, reflecting the Zen teaching wisdom of “using form to break form.”

Finally, the humanized treatment of spatial scale. Experience is controlled through a rhythm of compression and release: a low corridor forces one to bow before entering, while a suddenly open courtyard symbolizes liberation from constraints. This contrasting design coincides with the “pressure-relief” mechanism of modern psychology.

3.2. Architecture: Materialized Representation of Zen Symbols

The architectural complex of Caoxi Temple transforms abstract Zen philosophy into perceptible material carriers through form and details (Figure 2). The architecture exhibits simple characteristics with “decorative reduction.” The main hall adopts a single-eave hip-and-gable style, eschewing complex bracket sets and color paintings, showcasing the beauty of structural authenticity with grey tiles and plain wood, echoing the Zen doctrine of “not establishing words” [12].

In spatial organization, the architectural group interprets “non-duality” through a layout that is “separated yet continuous.” The openwork windows of corridors and walls both demarcate functional areas and maintain visual connectivity; solid walls symbolize worldly boundaries, while pierced patterns suggest wisdom transcending oppositions.

Detail treatment conceals a symbolic system. Steps are often set in odd numbers, corresponding to Buddhist stages of practice like the “seven-story pagoda”; the circular window on the lintel metaphorically represents the wondrous phenomenon of the “Moon Contained in Heaven,” with the architectural sequence guiding visitors through a metaphorical journey of spiritual sublimation (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Caoxi Temple Architectural Complex.



Figure 3. The “Moon Contained in Heaven” Phenomenon.

3.3. Plants: The Imagery Hierarchy of “Perceiving Emptiness through Form”

The plant configuration at Caoxi Temple transcends mere scenic function, constructing a Zen enlightenment path of “perceiving emptiness through form” through multi-layered imagery organization (Figure 4).

The selection of plant species carries clear symbolic meaning: the “Three Friends of Winter” – pine, bamboo, and plum – correspond respectively to the spiritual qualities esteemed in Zen, forming a semantic network through specific combinations [13].

The interactive relationship between plants and space realizes the middle layer of imagery (Figure 5). Caoxi Temple employs dramatic techniques of “concealment and revelation”: dense bamboo forests on both sides of winding paths form visual barriers, with gaps suddenly left at turns, allowing distant pagodas to unfold like a scroll, simulating the Zen process of “breaking attachments.”



Figure 4. *Caoxi Temple Plant Configuration.*



Figure 5. *Relationship between Plants and Space at Caoxi Temple.*

The highest level of Zen meaning is embodied in the symbiotic relationship between plants and time. The accumulated growth rings of ancient trees, moss spreading on stone steps, become material witnesses to the dialectical unity of “eternity” and “the instant.” Preserving dead ancient trees alongside new vines creates a landscape juxtaposing life and death, directly pointing to the core Zen doctrine of “the non-duality of life and death” [14].

4. The Value Justification and Contemporary Translation of Caoxi Temple Landscape

4.1. Multidimensional Interpretation of Cultural Value

4.1.1. Religious Value: Continuation of the Dharma Lineage through “Syncretism of Zen and Yunnan Esoteric Buddhism”

The landscape of Caoxi Temple reflects the cultural fusion of Zen and Yunnan Esoteric Buddhism. In the configuration of the architectural complex, the parallel design of the Main Hall and the Esoteric Hall is most representative: the Main Hall continues the axial sequence of Han Chinese Buddhism, while the Vairocana Hall adopts the mandala layout unique to Yunnan Esotericism. The two engage in a spatial dialogue of “mutual reference between Zen and Esoteric traditions” through connecting corridors.

The symbolic treatment of religious ritual objects and natural elements strengthens the visual transmission of the Dharma lineage. Patterns of Esoteric Buddhist vajras, dharma wheels, etc., are transformed into pavement motifs, interwoven with Zen

motifs like lotuses and composite flowers, allowing practitioners to receive the influence of dual spiritual streams through daily contact.

4.1.2. Aesthetic Value: The Construction Wisdom of “Unconventional yet Conforming to the Dao”

The aesthetic value of Caoxi Temple lies in its construction techniques that appear to violate conventions yet subtly align with Zen principles. By deliberately creating visual contradictions to break fixed perceptions, such as diagonal stepping stones at right-angle turns or natural solitary rocks in regular courtyards, viewers are compelled to step out of habitual thinking.

The art of blank leave demonstrates even more refined wisdom. Large areas retain the original landform without modification; the liberation pond has a path on only one side, with the other side kept in its natural state. This “unfinished” state challenges the traditional aesthetics of completeness in gardens, fitting the Zen philosophical view of “true emptiness, wondrous existence.”

4.1.3. Ecological Value: The Natural Ethic of “Insentient Beings Preaching the Dharma”

The ecological value of Caoxi Temple originates from the Zen philosophical view of “insentient beings preaching the Dharma,” which regards all natural things as equal living existences and carriers of Buddhist teaching.

Species selection follows the “localization” principle, using plants native to Yunnan, forming plant communities that seamlessly connect with the surrounding ecosystem.

Water system design reflects “adaptive” ecological wisdom. Utilizing the natural terrain to build rainwater collection systems, achieving natural water circulation through permeable paving and dry stream diversion.

The edges of water bodies are built with porous stones, providing habitat for amphibians, extending Zen compassion to non-human life forms [15].

4.2. Core Dimensions and Design Strategies for the Contemporary Translation of Zen Aesthetics

4.2.1. Conceptual Translation: From Zen Principles to Design Philosophy

The contemporary translation of Zen aesthetics is first manifested in the creative transformation of core concepts into design philosophy.

The concept of “emptiness/tranquility” translates into a strategy of spatial blank leave, emphasizing negative space to provide users with a container for mental sedimentation.

“Sudden enlightenment” thinking transforms into a cognitive trigger mechanism, using dramatic turns in the landscape sequence to break the viewer’s inertial thinking.

The “natural” philosophy transforms into an ecological design ethic, establishing a material ethic that rejects the resource waste and spiritual alienation caused by over-processing.

4.2.2. Spatial Translation: The Modern Generation of Zen Experience

The key to the spatial translation of Zen aesthetics lies in transforming traditional Zen experiences into physical environments perceptible to modern people. The Caoxi Temple case demonstrates the contemporary reconstruction of the Zen experience through three major strategies: spatial sequence, interface treatment, and circulation design.

Spatial sequence organization breaks traditional axial symmetry, adopting a non-linear narrative structure of “introduction, development, turn, and conclusion.” The winding entrance path creates a “separation from the mundane” effect; the central courtyard implies a psychological transition from the “profane” to the “sacred” through material gradation; finally, the meditation platform achieves the spatial climax of “suddenly seeing one’s true nature.”

5. Conclusions

This study, focusing on the garden of Caoxi Temple in Yunnan, explored the practical logic of Zen aesthetics in traditional garden construction and its paths for contemporary translation. Through multidimensional analysis, it revealed the materialized expression mechanisms of Zen aesthetic concepts such as “emptiness/tranquility,” “sudden enlightenment,” and “naturalness.”

The Caoxi Temple case demonstrates that Zen aesthetics influences garden construction through three core dimensions:

In spatial organization, it constructs an experiential sequence of “introduction, development, turn, and conclusion,” realizing the transmission of Zen meaning that “directly points to the human mind”.

In material application, it practices the ecological ethic of “using materials to their fullest potential,” demonstrating the philosophical wisdom of “one is all”.

In symbolic translation, it accomplishes the innovative interpretation of traditional elements, forming a modern expression that is “both like and unlike.”

Contemporary landscape design can draw inspiration from the Caoxi Temple case:

Zen creation must transcend formal imitation and grasp the spiritual core of “simplicity/austerity” and “subtlety/implicitness”.

Ecological translation should establish the natural view of “insentient beings preaching the Dharma,” elevating sustainability concepts into cultural identity.

Symbolic innovation needs to balance traditional genes with modern needs, allowing Zen aesthetics to maintain vitality in the contemporary context.

These findings provide a theoretical framework and practical reference for the modern transformation of traditional garden art.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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