

# Nature's Poetry Unveiled: Exploring the Symbolism and Design Philosophy of Chinese and Persian Gardens through Metaphor and Art

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**Abstract.** This paper delves into the symbolism and design philosophy of Chinese and Persian gardens, revealing the profound depths of their metaphorical and artistic expressions. As landscape architecture, gardens act as conduits for cultural transmission, embodying an understanding of the cosmic order and reflecting the passage of history. Focusing on pre-modern Chinese and Persian gardens, this study explores their design philosophy and characteristics. Chinese gardens prioritise the harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature, exemplified through a deep reverence for the natural world. Meticulous treatment of the landscape seamlessly integrates gardens with their surroundings, drawing inspiration from elements found in Chinese landscape painting. Persian gardens, on the other hand, showcase the distinctive Chahar Bagh layout, providing glimpses into an ideal cosmic order. Influenced by the beauty of Persian poetry, these gardens take on the essence of living poems, evoking a sense of tranquillity and allegorical meaning. Waterways, pavilions, and lush vegetation create captivating oases within the arid landscape, inviting relaxation. By analysing the architecture, symbolism, and design philosophy of both Chinese and Persian gardens, this study uncovers the remarkable similarities and differences that exist between them. However, these gardens extend beyond their physical manifestations, beckoning visitors to engage with metaphorical realms. The integration of poetry, painting, and various art forms enriches the multidimensional experience, eliciting profound sentiments and unlocking the transformative power of nature's poetry. Ultimately, Chinese and Persian gardens embody the very essence of nature's poetry, serving as bridges between built environments, humanity, and the natural world. Through the harmonious fusion of art, design, and the intricate relationship between humans and nature, these gardens inspire awe and reveal the timeless beauty that resides within nature's realms.

**Keywords:** Chinese garden, Persian garden, symbolic meaning, art, nature

## Introduction

Landscape architecture and garden design represent the identity, and history of a nation, and they act as an interface to convey the meanings and identity to the future generations. Gardens as the most emerging type of landscape architecture have been evolved throughout the history of nations and represent the culture, customs, and belief of societies. According to Bacon, garden is defined as “the purest of human pleasures and the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man” [1]. Gardens are also presented in a similar way by Hunt as “concentrated or perfected forms of place-making” [2].

Gardens are not only perceived as green spaces, but also have symbolic meaning in each culture. In Bible, gardens are represented as “Eden”, and “paradise on earth”, and in Hebrew such Edens are translated as “unidentified region or country” [3]. Throughout time, ancient gardens have shifted in terms of layout, aesthetics, as well as function. However, they have been always inspired built environment practitioners as best practices, that consists of lessons to be learned for future designers.

Chinese and Persian gardens are both considered as ancient gardens, that have rich history, and their establishment dates back to ancient times. Chinese and Persian gardens, both, have several key design and philosophical features in common (e.g., interpretive constructs: enclosure, environs, space (and time), and pattern and perspective). The spatial segregation and connection between garden vistas and interior spaces are the other major characteristics for both gardens. The perception towards nature is the same for both cultures, as both see nature not as the object to be tamed and altered, but the model to be imitated and learned from [4]. In the design philosophy of both Chinese and Persian gardens, human is influenced by Mother Nature, and learn more about him/herself via nature, and thus become more resilient in living with harmony with nature and the entire world. This is in contrast with the approach in western garden design, where the philosophy behind the design underpins more towards a linear relationship, which means human is influenced by nature, but then he/she reacts to the environment, and thus identifies ways to live

with it via technology, modernity, and policy. Therefore, strong belief in a sense of unity with nature is another common design philosophy that can be seen in the generation of both Chinese and Persian gardens.

With our scholarly focus directed towards the enchanting landscapes of Chinese and Persian gardens, this paper explores how nature and natural elements are interpreted in the Chinese and Persian culture and translated into landscape architecture, bearing profound symbolic meaning and design philosophy within these ancient civilisations. These gardens, rather than standing in isolation, weave an intricate tapestry with various art forms, forging a symbiotic relationship.

To understand the significance of nature in these gardens, we delve into the cultural and philosophical foundations, and their interplay with painting and poetry. This study scrutinises the culture, philosophy, patterns, and their interrelation with other art forms. Through this multifaceted lens, it becomes evident that Chinese and Persian gardens, while externally distinct, share a fundamental philosophy in their approach to garden-making and the poetic interpretation of the relationship between humanity and nature.

This study involves qualitative research methods for examining the landscape design of pre-modern Chinese and Persian gardens with regard to the respective philosophy, symbolism, painting, poetry, and culture before drawing a comparison between them. Similarities and differences between Chinese and Persian gardens are highlighted. Intellectual contemplation of the intrinsic harmonious relationship between humanity and nature is also stimulated.

## Chinese Gardens

### *The pattern and heavenly beauty*

In pre-modern China, garden-making was characterised by a deep appreciation for natural forms and a departure from the pursuit of geometrical aesthetics and grid-based designs. Instead, the focus was on creating an environment that seamlessly blended with nature, with artificial interventions being imperceptible to the eye [5]. The Chinese character *tian* 天, which symbolises nature, is also associated with heaven. This association reflects a deep reverence for the natural world in Chinese culture, and this respect is reflected in all aspects of garden-making. “In the case of irregular terrain, the focus should be on exploiting the unique characteristics of the site to plan the garden layout. The use of orthogonal grids is not a necessary requirement and should not be a cause for concern” [6]. Even in instances where the site was disrespected, the term “*wuqiao zhiren* 无窍之人”, meaning an ignorant person lacking the ability to



Fig. 1. *Garden of the Inept Administrator or Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician* by Wen Zhenming [Metropolitan Museum of Art]

intelligently adapt to the natural setting of the garden was employed.

Although natural forms held great value, the Chinese garden culture did not involve simply copying them or reverting to a state of nature. Instead, it was grounded in a philosophy of the “unity and harmony between heaven (nature) and humanity”. Consequently, humans were not absent but rather an integral part of the garden design process. For instance, Wen Zhenming’s (1470-1559 CE) drawing for the Zhuozheng Yuan (Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician or Garden of the Inept Administrator) featured human figures amidst the landscapes (Lu 2011). These human figures were painted as an integrated part of the scenery, as shown in Fig. 1. In the sense of “looking out and being looked at” [7], Human is also a type of scenery of the garden.

### *Relationship between Chinese gardens and Chinese landscape painting*

If the pre-modern Chinese garden pursued intellectual, spiritual and imaginary interactions between man and landscape, it may be questioned how these interactions were realised. Chinese landscape paintings played an important role to facilitate such interactions. If a garden could evoke a feeling as if strolling in a Chinese landscape painting, it was regarded as a remarkable success.

The white walls are used as pieces of drawing paper. Use stones and rocks to draw. Select stones and rocks by learning from the *cunwen* 皴纹 (the texture drawn by the wrinkle method, an important drawing method used in Chinese landscape painting). Learning from the ancient brushwork to add more Huanshan pine and cypress, plum trees, bamboos [8].



Fig. 2. The rockeries outside of Celestial Lodge of Five Peaks, respectively on the northern and southern sides [photo by the first author]

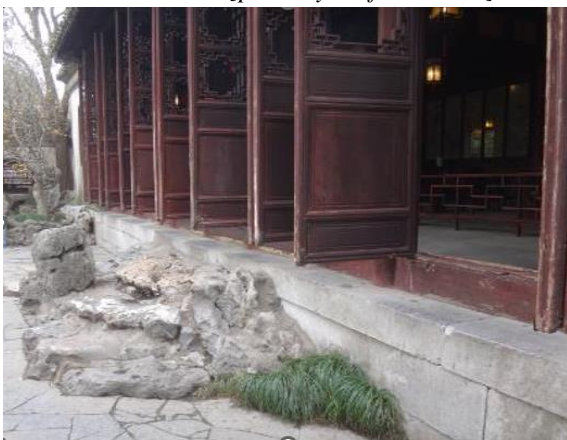


Fig. 3. The rockery used as steps of Celestial Lodge of Five Peaks [photo by the first author]



Fig. 4. The zigzag corridor around the rockery courtyard [photos by the first author]

When Ji Cheng built a garden for the client Mr. Wu, he analysed why this commission succeeded. Ji accentuated that “the landscape is endowed with a feeling of Chinese landscape painting” [9].

This theory is echoed in *Hua shanshui fu* 画山水赋 (On Chinese Landscape Paintings) and *Linquan gaozhi* 林泉高致 (The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams) [10]. Li Cheng elaborates that the painter first defines the primary and secondary positions, and secondly tells the relationship according to the distance. Thirdly, the painter

arranges landscape elements and finally draws out the height [of each element] [11].

This way of designing the composition of the Chinese landscape painting based on a hierarchical interpretation is further discussed by painters and theorists. Wang Wei notes that “the chief peak is better to be drawn with high alpine crags, while other mountains and hills are drawn to serve the chief peak following the overall ambience” [12].

Rockeries were the main scenery for wufeng xianguan 五峰仙馆 (Celestial Lodge of Five Peaks) of Liu Yuan. The two longitudinal sides face two yards with rockeries (Fig. 2).

Both facades were enclosed by continuous lattice doors, which could be completely open, so people inside the lodge can enjoy the rockeries. Rockers were directly used as the steps of the lodge (Fig. 3)

On one side of the lodge was a zigzag corridor that opened to one of the rockery courtyards (Fig. 4). After a peripatetic journey through the corridor among rockers, one could reach the Celestial Lodge of Five Peaks.

#### Architecture and metaphor

Architecture played multiple roles in the pre-modern Chinese garden. Maggie Keswick comments architecture in the pre-modern Chinese garden—as metaphor. “In a Chinese garden, architecture is more playful than useful and, above all, more metaphorical” [13]. Architecture can be meaningful and playful in gardens.

Architecture served as metaphor implying other elements, which were described in a poetic manner, especially natural elements. “An essential aspect of the Chinese garden is its playful transformation of the animal and vegetable kingdom into architectural forms” [14]. The transformation could rely on the naming of architecture. A small-roofed arch bridge resembling rainbow was named *xiaofeihong* 小飞虹 (little flying rainbow, Fig. 5).

Buildings and architectural features were popularly named after the natural landscape near them. Beyond simply referring to the surrounding natural landscape, the naming reflected a poetic metaphor. *Yuanxiang tang* 远香堂 (Drifting Fragrance Hall or The Hall of Distant Fragrance) was built on the southern bank of a pond, where lovely lotus flowers were planted. The name “drifting fragrance” was quoted from Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017–1073 CE), who was a prestigious philosopher and literatus of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Zhou assimilated lotus flowers to a respectable person with great virtue. The lotus flower still kept fresh, pure and clean with “drifting fragrance”, although it grew out from dirty mud at the bottom of a pond. “The further away one is, the purer is the fragrance. Upright and elegant, it establishes itself cleanly.



Fig. 5. Xiaofeihong 小飞虹 (little flying rainbow)  
[photo by the first author]



Fig. 6. Linear geometry of Fin Garden, Kashan, Iran  
[photo from authors archive]

It can be viewed from far away but cannot be toyed with” [15]. Zhou used the life of a lotus flower to describe a spiritual harmony that was worthy to pursue. In the same vein, a respectable person of great virtue could still keep his/her stainlessness and rectitude as the lotus flower no matter what s/he would encounter [16]. The Drifting Fragrance Hall was not only a place for enjoying the lotus pond, but also implied a spiritual harmony by referring to an early literatus.

For Ji Cheng, designing architecture according to the specific context and surrounding scenery was very important. He emphasised this strategy on

various stages of building for a garden, from selecting a site to build a building. Ji explained that in a garden, both the location and orientation of built environment elements had less constraints, so it was important to judge case by case according to the specific context and circumstance [17].

#### *Landscape element and transcendence of nature*

The principle of how to integrate natural landscape elements into traditional Chinese garden is following the natural form but transcending the nature through artistic treatment. For example, water is a natural element that was commonly used among traditional Chinese gardens. The status of the water in traditional Chinese garden was demonstrated with how important its attribute would enhance solid substances. The relationship between water and stone corresponds *xu* (the empty or void) and *shi* (the full or solid). A chapter in *Treaties on Superfluous Things* was dedicated to elaborate water and stone. “Stones evoke historical reminiscence while water calm down people with tranquillity. Water and stones are indispensable for the garden” [18]. Professor Chen Congzhou defines the water as a part of *tianqu* (natural interest) that was similar to clouds, shadows, sound and radiance [19]. Why these elements were assorted as a category was they represented *xu*, the empty. In the traditional Chinese painting, blank areas were usually applied to show water or clouds [20]. Chen continues to elaborate the *xu* (empty) is what the *shi* (full) relies upon [21]. A metaphor further explained how Chinese traditional view of landscape design perceived water. “Stones are the spine and bones of the mountain while water and spring are the blood. If there are no ‘bones’, the mountain would be too soft to stand. If there is no ‘blood’, the mountain would be arid and bleak” [22].

#### **Persian Gardens**

##### *The pattern and Chahar Bagh*

Since the ancient Achaemenids Persian Empire (550-330 BCE), the Persian Garden has been characterised by the *Chahar Bagh* pattern. *Chahar Bagh* means four gardens in Persian with reference to the pre-Islamic belief in a four-part world [23]. Such quadripartite geometric structure with pavilions located at the intersection of axes is regarded as a prominent feature of the Persian garden [24].

The notion of the quadrilateral *Chahar Bagh* remains intact in the Islamic era due to the four gardens of paradise mentioned in the *Quran*:

And for him, who fears to stand before his Lord, are two gardens.

And beside them are two other gardens [25].

The *Chahar Bagh* pattern has been continuously using for more than two millenniums. Despite various locations and site conditions, such unique

pattern is still adopted in garden design consistently, involving the use of right angles, the sub-division into four sections, two axes perpendicular to each other and general symmetry.

The Persian garden layout is dominated by linear geometry reflecting the cosmic order of the world with a pool of life in the centre [26]. Having waterways as main axes, this symbolises the Garden of Eden or *Jannah* (paradise) of abundance watered by four flowing rivers [27]. The four-folded garden layout refers to the four principal elements of sky, earth, water and plants [28]. The Persian garden is designed to exemplify heaven and realise the dream of life in paradise on earth. It provides a comfortable microclimate amid harsh desert conditions and is a magnificent retreat away from the dusty and noisy outside world [29].

#### *Relationship between Persian gardens and Persian poetry*

The Persian garden is closely associated with Persian poetry and literature. The Persian lyric poet, Hafez (1325-1390 CE) in the *Divān* (collected poems of Hafez) introduces the transcendental world as a paradisiac garden with rose bed, fruits and birds:

From the grace of Eternity without beginning I am expecting the Elysian garden (CCCXII/7).

From Paradise's fruits what relish might find/ He who hasn't bitten the apple of a darling's chin? (CCXXIV/ 9). A cage like this is unworthy of a sweet singer like me/ I will go to the rose bed of Paradise because I am the bird of that Garden (CCCXXXIV/2).

Hafez highlights the binary of paradise and the earth by drawing a stark contrast between "Holy Rose Garden" with "snare of accidents" or "the abode of desolation":

I am the bird of the Holy Rose Garden. What description shall I give of separation:/ Of how I have tumbled into this snare of accidents? (CCCX/2)

I was an angel and my home was the highest Paradise./ Adam brought me into this temple of the abode of desolation (CCCX/3).

Despite the dichotomy of paradise and the earth, according to Hafez, it is still possible to set up a materialistic garden on the earth to bear a resemblance to the transcendental paradise:

Now that the rose has come into the meadow, come from non-existence into being./...The world in the season of the lily and the rose has become like Paradise Sublime./ How the rose gets mounted, Solomon-like, on air, when/ in the morning the bird enters with the psalmody of David! (XLVII/1)

In Hafez's poems, the allegorical use of garden imagery is a recurring theme [30]. The tranquillity in landscape, the soothing sound of flowing water, the fragrance of flower blossoms and the relaxing music of singing birds all evoke the vegetative imagery of paradise [31].



Fig. 7. Chehel Sotoun pavilion and garden in Isfahan, Iran [photo from authors archive]

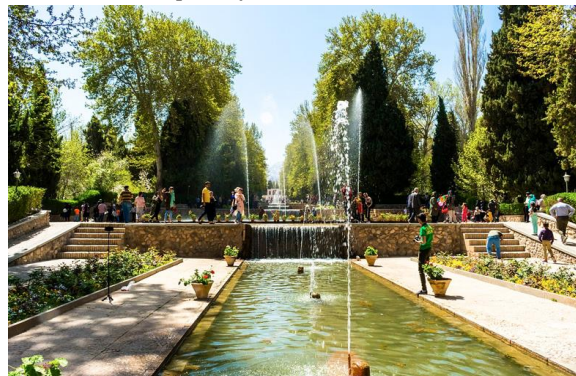


Fig. 8. Shazdeh Garden, Mahan, Kerman, Iran [photo from authors archive]

#### *Architecture and context*

Located in the hot and arid climate of Iran, Persian gardens are surrounded by solid boundary walls with layered mud bands and rammed earth (*chineh*) for protection against unpleasant winds and harsh conditions [32]. The external appearance of Persian gardens may look simple and be compatible with the surrounding earthy environment, however, the space enclosed by boundary walls displays elaborate decoration and a variety of materials, ranging from tiles with various colours to stone, timber, mud brick, stucco and lime.

Pavilions are the primary architectural form in Persian gardens. They are often located at the intersections of axes and serve as focal points of interest in the whole garden composition and layout [33]. As a prominent architectural element, pavilions are highly decorated, including the use of lobulated arches and other ornamentation [34].

#### *Landscape elements and oases in desert*

The survival of Persian gardens in a desert environment heavily relies on water availability. The crucial factors for due consideration are only the source and collection of water, but also how to distribute water, manage water consumption and irrigate the garden in such a hostile context [35]. For a sloping site, water can be distributed by

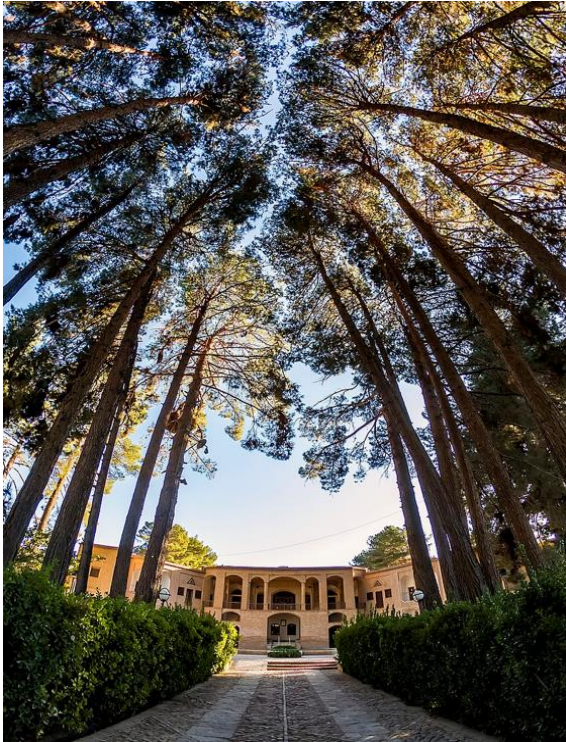


Fig. 9. Landscape of the Akbarieh Garden, Birjand, Iran [photo from authors archive]

gravity to minimise the use of energy. Waterways in Persian gardens contribute to the microclimate by creating cool and refreshing breeze.

Similar to water, plants are key landscape elements of Persian gardens. Providing umbrageous and tall trees along waterways is an effective way to reduce the rate of water evaporation. They also attract birds, filter the breeze, provide shades, increase evaporative cooling, mitigate solar penetration to the ground and regulate heat of the sun [36].

### Discussion

The artistic allure of both pre-modern Chinese and Persian gardens extends beyond their physical attributes. These gardens engaged in a dynamic interaction with other forms of art, giving rise to a multi-layered and immersive experience. The integration of poetry, painting, and other artistic elements adds depth and richness to the gardens, evoking sentiments, metaphoric meanings, and a sense of transcendence.

In pre-modern Chinese gardens, the pursuit of natural morphology was evident in the tangible domain, encompassing patterns, built forms, and the presentation of landscapes. However, the true essence of the relationship between humanity and nature, the intangible aspect, resided in a more abstract realm. The literati, through their intellectual interpretations and imaginary interactions with the landscape, bestowed poetic meaning upon even the most mundane natural elements. A tree, a drop of rainwater, or a pavilion were transformed into

profound artistic symbols. Garden-making, akin to painting or strolling through a Chinese landscape painting, went beyond the physical attributes of nature to focus on its artistic characteristics.

The literati deeply appreciated the artistic qualities of elements within the garden. For instance, water, offering emptiness and tranquillity, held greater value than its physical properties. It was seen as a mirror-like surface that reflected the surrounding scenery, creating a sense of harmony and poetic contemplation. Stones, on the other hand, were seen as embodying solidity and permanence. They were carefully selected and positioned to represent mountains or rocky landscapes, creating a microcosm of nature within the garden. The hierarchy of elements corresponded to the layers of scenery in different positions within the landscape. Mountains represented the grandeur and majesty of nature, while rivers and streams symbolised the flow of life and the passage of time. The architecture within the garden was often playful, metaphorical, and more concerned with evoking emotions rather than utilitarian purposes. Pavilions and bridges were designed to harmonise with the natural surroundings, blurring the boundaries between the man-made and the natural.

In addition to the physical elements, the literati infused the garden with literary and philosophical ideas. Poetic inscriptions, calligraphy, and paintings were incorporated into the garden's design, adding layers of meaning and aesthetic beauty. The literati drew inspiration from classical Chinese poetry, landscape paintings, and philosophy, infusing the garden with profound artistic significance. They sought to create a spiritual retreat, a realm where they could connect with nature, reflect on the transient nature of life, and contemplate the deeper truths of existence. The tangible physical garden, therefore, was a vehicle for the literati to pursue a domain beyond the mortal world. It was an opportunity to transcend the material and engage with nature on a spiritual and imaginary level.

Similarly, Persian gardens, known as earthly paradises, not only provided glimpses of the ideal cosmic order and beauty but also served as a significant inspiration for poetry. The intertwining of literary gardens and real gardens created a mutually enhancing interrelationship. Every element and scene within the garden could be endowed with allegorical meaning and literary beauty. The Persian garden, known as the *Chahar Bagh*, was designed with a quadrilateral layout divided into four parts by water channels representing the principles of sky, earth, water, and plants. The integration of gardens with other art forms, such as poetry and calligraphy, facilitated deeper philosophical and moral contemplations about virtues and the intricate relationship between nature and humanity.

Poetry played a central role in Persian garden design. The garden became a living poem, where every element and feature contributed to its poetic beauty. The gardens were often adorned with inscriptions of poetry and verses from classical Persian literature, creating a harmonious interplay between words and the natural environment. Each garden had its own narrative, its own story to tell. The design elements, such as the arrangement of trees, flowers, and water features, were carefully selected to reflect the themes and emotions expressed in the accompanying poetry. The gardens became immersive spaces where visitors could engage with literature, connect with their cultural heritage, and experience the beauty and serenity of the natural world.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, the artistic experience provided by pre-modern Chinese and Persian gardens transcends their physical manifestations. Both gardens encapsulate a desire for a harmonious interconnection between humanity and nature. They embodied design principles that gave rise to a poetic and metaphorical realm, evoking profound sentiments and imbuing metaphorical meanings through the elegant integration of elements from diverse art forms.

The pre-modern Chinese garden conceals meticulous designs and artificial interventions

beneath a seemingly natural and harmonious landscape, inviting visitors to immerse themselves in a spiritual and imaginative journey. Persian gardens, on the other hand, present a symmetrical and controlled arrangement, providing a glimpse of the ideal cosmic order while inspiring poets to explore the beauty and allegorical potential of the gardens.

By integrating other art forms, these gardens become multi-dimensional, stimulating intellectual contemplation and eliciting a range of sentiments. The literary interpretations, metaphoric expressions, and the integration of poetry and painting enhance the overall artistic experience, allowing visitors to transcend reality and engage with nature on a profound and imaginative level.

The pre-modern Chinese and Persian gardens serve as testaments to the enduring human longing for a space that intertwines built environments with the natural world. Their artistic allure lies in their ability to offer a transcendent milieu, where visitors can reimagine the cosmic world and partake in a poetic, profound, and enriching aesthetic experience. The interplay between nature, art, and human imagination in these gardens creates a harmonious fusion that awakens the senses, evokes contemplation, and provides solace in the beauty and serenity of the natural world.

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**Kopsavilkums.** Pētījums ietver informāciju par Ķīnas un Persijas dārzu simboliku un dizaina filozofiju, atklājot to metaforisko un māksliniecisko izpausmju dziļumus. Koncentrējoties uz pirmsmodernajiem ķīniešu un persiešu dārziem, šajā pētījumā tiek pētīta to dizaina filozofija un īpašības. Ķīniešu dārzos prioritāte ir cilvēces un dabas harmoniska līdzās pastāvēšana, ko raksturo dziļa cieņa pret dabisko pasauli. Rūpīga ainavas apstrāde nemanāmi integrē dārzus ar to apkārtni, iedvesmojoties no elementiem, kas atrodami ķīniešu ainavu glezniecībā.

Analizējot gan ķīniešu, gan persiešu dārzu arhitektūru, simboliku un dizaina filozofiju, pētījums atklāj ievērojamās līdzības un atšķirības, kas pastāv starp tiem. Tomēr analizētie dārzi sniedz ārpasaulē to fiziskajām izpausmēm, mudinot apmeklētājus iesaistīties metaforiskās jomās. Dzejas, glezniecības un dažādu mākslas formu integrācija bagātina daudzdimensionālo pieredzi, izraisot dziļas sajūtas un atraisot dabas dzejas pārveidojošo spēku. Galu galā ķīniešu un persiešu dārzi iemieso dabas dzejas būtību, kalpojot par tiltiem starp apbūvēto vidi, cilvēci un dabas pasauli. Pateicoties harmoniskai mākslas, dizaina saplūšanai un sarežģītajām attiecībām starp cilvēku un dabu, analizētie dārzi iedveš bijību un atklāj mūžīgo skaistumu, kas mīt dabas jomā.