

Explores the Linguistic Aspects of the "Oriental Charm" in Contemporary Gardens——Focus on the Hangzhou National Version Museum as an Example

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Abstract. Archisemiotics, which was born in the 1950s, not only opened up new ideas for architectural design, but also provided effective methods and theories for people to deeply understand the meaning of architecture. During this time, semiotic studies sprang up and were applied to various theoretical work, such as literature, film, and posters, but the arguments were similar, which coincided with the emergence of highly formal languages. In such a wave of semiotics, we find the most essential symbolic meaning of various artistic languages, that is, the multiple meanings and ambiguities of artistic languages. This article hopes to explore the specific expression of "oriental charm" in contemporary gardens by placing architecture in the context of linguistics.

Key words: Architectural design; Oriental culture; philology; Wittgenstein; Wang Shu

1. Introduction

The concept of "Oriental Charm" seems to be initially associated with a grand narrative, shrouding this abstract concept in an indescribable veil. However, if one focuses solely on specific expressions, they risk falling into the trap of being overly tied to the signifier and the signified. Furthermore, this paper hopes to explore the spiritual core of "oriental charm" from the perspective of linguistic translation methods. From the perspective of linguistics, the author aims to explore the linguistic characteristics of contemporary garden art by providing a simple description of the abstract concept of "Oriental Charm." Therefore, this paper attempts a preliminary exploration of contemporary garden works under the concept of "Oriental Charm" from a linguistic perspective.

The 20th century is often referred to as the "linguistic century" when people began to connect architecture and language based on their comparability. Wittgenstein and Saussure often used chess as a metaphor when explaining language. The essence of language lies in the internal forms that are independent of its substance (specific signifiers); that is, the meaning of a piece in chess lies in the rules governing its movement and its relationships with other pieces. Therefore, the essence of language is a system of differences.[1]

However, such metaphors can lead one to believe that the rules of language can be explicitly expressed. Grammar was initially discovered as a method for learning foreign languages and classical languages. Grammar is not a set of rules but rather a "regularity." Without grammar, learning a language for those not sharing a common set of rules, such as foreigners, would be

highly inefficient. Yet, for native speakers of a language, grammar is unnecessary. Before the rise of modern nationalism, people were often unaware that their vernacular languages had grammatical structures.

In other words, the rules of a language are not devised for native speakers but for those learning the language. This implies that one doesn't need to know the grammar of Chinese, for example, but can still point out grammatical errors when foreigners speak it. This suggests an understanding of Chinese grammar. However, one cannot pinpoint the "basis" of grammar for foreign speakers' errors, merely saying, "We don't say it that way." This implies a lack of understanding of Chinese grammar, one only knows its "usage." [1]

From a Platonist perspective, we can learn grammar because we already "know" it. It should be noted that while rules exist, they cannot always be explicitly expressed. However, early 20th-century systematic studies of language pointed out that art, as a special language, has multiple meanings and ambiguity in its expression, especially in the field of architecture. The clearer and more unambiguous the expression of architecture, the more it departs from art.

For example, buildings with clear meanings and expressions, like the Fuk Luk Sau Hotel (Figure 1), often make people feel strange with their sharp symbolism.



Figure 1. Fuk Luk Sau Hotel

Similarly, in the case of Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House (Figure 2), the question arises: is the form of the building an open shell, two mating turtles, or something else entirely? This suggests that the ambiguity of form opens up the potential for meaning.



Figure 2. Sydney Opera House

2. Oriental Charm: In the Form of Grammar

The so-called "Oriental Charm" is such an abstract concept. Hegel described classical architecture in aesthetics as follows: the fundamental concept of true architectural art lies not in incorporating spiritual meaning into the building itself to make it an independent symbol of inner meaning but in the fact that this meaning has already obtained independent existence outside the building. This existence can be of two types: one is that meaning has already been independently expressed by another broader art form (in the true classical period, this was mainly sculpture); the other is that people have vividly recognized this meaning in their direct real-life experience and put it into practice.[2]

However, he did not explain how this "spiritual meaning" is freely transferred between these two different forms of art, nor did he indicate how the meaning "vividly recognized in real life" is expressed artistically.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in the creative process of artists: similar to a moment when they suddenly grasp a fleeting "inspiration," if they want to express it through language or recreate it physically, they need to engage in prolonged contemplation. It's akin to how Robert Venturi, after writing "less is a bore," took a long time to create "Mother's House."

This is where the consciousness of the "translation" system comes into play. As mentioned earlier, there are "proper names" that cannot be translated between different languages, and this situation is widespread in different arts. In other words, a spiritual meaning that has already been "aptly" expressed in a certain art form is captured to some extent during the continuous development of this art form, thus incorporating the means of expression of this art form into the original spiritual meaning, which is highly similar to the development process of signifier and signified in language.

For example, in the context of Chinese art history, bronze artifacts gradually formed deep connections with various societal concepts over time. The "ding" (A kind of ancient Chinese meat cooking utensils), for instance, became highly associated with power and status during its development from the Shang Dynasty to the Zhou Dynasty. Its decorative patterns often employed symmetrical and repetitive artistic techniques. Even today in China, if one seeks an image that symbolizes "power and status," it is likely to be the ding.

Examples like these abound.

However, a more representative example would be the expression of Japanese garden aesthetics and the dry landscape style known as "karesansui." According to *The Sakuteiki*, or "Records of Garden Making," "In places without ponds or flowing water, stones and white sand are arranged to create dry landscape gardens. These gardens primarily use stones, white sand, and moss as their main materials. White sand and stones of various shapes and sizes are used to recreate the appearance of nature. The so-called karesansui is created by using stones and stones to form secluded mountain villages, gently rolling hills, or mountainous landscapes, even villages within the mountains"[3]. Initially, the karesansui style served as a substitute for lacking natural conditions, but over the course of Japanese garden development, it gradually became associated with aesthetics such as "wabi-sabi" and "mono no aware," thus exhibiting a "technique expresses spirit, spirit binds technique" appearance.

When people want to recreate this original spiritual meaning in other art forms, they inevitably encounter these untranslatable "proper names." In such cases, the consciousness of "spiritual translation" is usually avoided because the purpose and efficiency of translation are absolute in this context. The presence of "proper names" inevitably devalues the "original meaning of the spirit" during the translation process between these arts. However, in some cases, this damage can be repaired, thanks to the mature "translation methods" that have gradually developed between certain art forms. For example, in the translation between sculpture and painting, Cubism has boldly and ingeniously translated the spiritual meaning of sculpture, allowing this spiritual meaning to be accurately represented in painting.

In Chinese painting, there are a large number of such "proper names," causing a sharp drop in translation efficiency. This leads to the following effects:

1. The extracted spiritual meaning from Chinese painting cannot be incorporated into new art forms and continues to exhibit the spiritual characteristics of Chinese painting.
2. The translation of spiritual meaning is not effectively executed, resulting in incomplete spiritual meaning. Therefore, a method for restoring meaning is needed in the translated art form to make it complete.

We can illustrate this effect through some experimental photography in China. In a series of photographs taken by Lang Jingshan in the 1930s, the influence of traditional Chinese painting is quite evident. He even attempted to overlay photos to recreate the unique "scattered-point perspective" of Chinese painting (Figure 3). Here, some unique conceptual ideas that can only be expressed in traditional Chinese painting, such as "brush and ink," "space," and even "unity of nature and humanity," are dissolved during the translational process. As a result, the final works have to "appropriate" some techniques from the field that photography can achieve, creating a sense of "sewing together."



Figure 3. Photographs by Lang Jingshan

It is also difficult to obtain materials from photography to complete the creation of Chinese paintings, when Prince Gong signed the "Treaty of Beijing," an Italian photographer named Felice Beato took his portrait. However, there is another version of this portrait: a Chinese painter created a Chinese painting based on this photographic portrait (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Two versions of Prince Gong's portrait

From this comparison, we can easily discern that the play of light and shadow on a person's face in the photograph cannot be perfectly reproduced in a Chinese painting, as Chinese portrait painting lacks such a representation of "facial shadows."

As the same, taking "Song Rhyme" as an example, how do we grasp the essence of Song Rhyme? In comparison to the aesthetic records left from the Song Dynasty, the modern understanding of Song Dynasty landscape gardens remains primarily at the level of images (Figure 5).

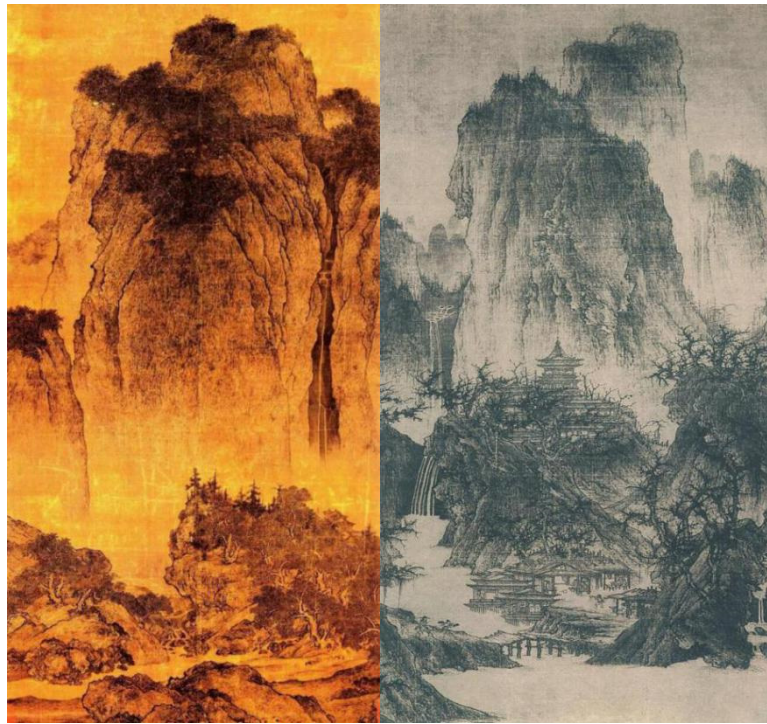


Figure 5. Song dynasty landscape painting

These images grasp "Song Rhyme" as a whole, considering the cultural background of the receiver as an integral part of understanding, resulting in a self-evident effect, as Laozi said, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name." We can understand this through Wittgenstein's statement that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Wittgenstein believed that our language and the world are isomorphic, which is not an empirical correspondence but a correspondence of logical forms, like a ruler placed on reality. When a proposition corresponds to a fact, we call this proposition an "image" of that fact. [4]For example, "Dao" is a representation of Laozi's recognition of a certain cosmic regularity. Similarly, "Song Rhyme" is a representation of the Chinese Song Dynasty literati's thoughts and spatial concepts, recognized by receivers with a common cultural background, through images. Its essence is culturally bourgeois, and it now has a new context for constructing a cultural community.

Regarding "Song Rhyme" itself, we can construct an abstract concept image. However, it should be noted that individual images of consciousness may vary, and it should be understood that such variations occur within a limited range, meaning that "Song Rhyme" has boundaries.

The question then is how to visualize such an abstract concept? Following Wittgenstein's approach in "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," let's investigate the visualization of "Song Rhyme."

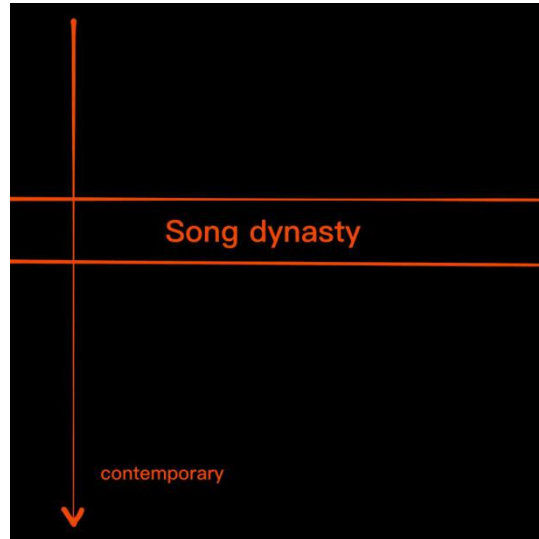


Figure 6. Visualization of "Time."

The above image (Figure 6) divides the world into historical images from top to bottom according to chronological order, with the Song Dynasty represented by red horizontal lines. Here, we represent things "with Song Rhyme" in white, things "without Song Rhyme" in black, and things "difficult to discern whether they have Song Rhyme" in gray. Exhaustively listing all propositions in the world of reality produces the following image (Figure 7).

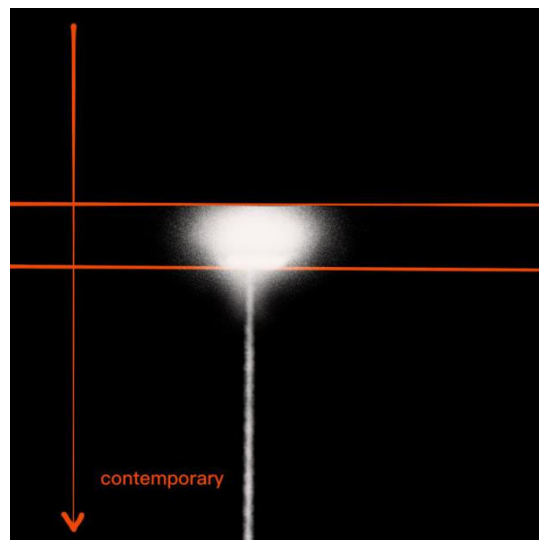


Figure 7. Visualization of "Song Rhyme."

Therefore, the image shown above is a visualization of "Song Rhyme."

Such a visual relationship exists, and further explanation is impossible; otherwise, one falls into the logical trap from Saussure's binary structure (Table 1) to Peirce's triadic structure[5], leading to an infinite regress in logic (Figure 8).

Table 1. Saussure's semiotics model in architect Architecture

signifier	signified
Forms	Functions
Space	Space concept
Colour	Ways of life
Volume	Activities
Surface	Religious belief
Smell	Technology
Etc.	Etc.

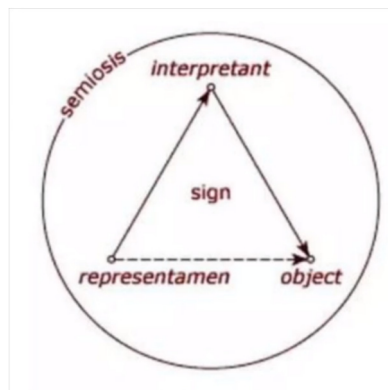


Figure 8. Peirce Semantic Triangle

Furthermore, the use of language only has meaning within specific contexts, and both communicators must ensure they are within the same "language game." Wittgenstein explicitly stated that a language game is part of a form of life, which runs through his entire later philosophical thought, implying that the study of language must return to the homeland of language—real-life situations.

It should be recognized that some signifiers tightly bound to specific contexts cannot be externalized (e.g., language translation). They have already become distinctive focal points of recognition for this cultural context. Attempting to translate such words means there is no usage of these words in other cultural contexts, but they play the role of studying another cultural context. In addition, some words themselves do not have practical meanings but can serve as carriers of narratives in specific contexts to express certain meanings. For example, Jakobson's "zero phoneme," mathematical zero symbols, and, especially, artificial languages (such as "0" in programming languages). From the perspective of architecture, such seemingly meaningless symbols are essential to architecture itself. This will be mentioned in later examples.

Returning to Wang Shu's National Version Museum, although he himself talked extensively about "modern Song Dynasty charm," as mentioned earlier, there are untranslatable "specialized languages" within this concept. For instance, it's impossible to directly translate the spatial forms of Song Dynasty paintings into the layout of physical spaces. Instead, an "analogical" approach must be employed, drawing inspiration from Qing Dynasty gardens. The "byproduct" that arises when transitioning from two-dimensional planes to three-dimensional spaces is detrimental to fully representing the original essence. Real-world gardens cannot achieve the expressive effects of painting from any angle or material, which means that the "Song Dynasty charm" in contemporary architecture is essentially a false proposition.

Therefore, what I want to discuss here is the issue of authentic construction. The use of language in the realm of the spiritual always exhibits a residue, creating gaps between the real construction and the inner images of consciousness. This is because the materials used in architecture "lack spirituality and carry weight" and can only imply the inner essence of the spirit through metaphorical forms. Such a mode of expression inevitably leads to ambiguity, as Roland Barthes stated, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author." Imposing a fixed author onto a work will inevitably result in a closed interpretation, pointing toward fundamentalism. Here, it is important to note that the author's viewpoint is only for reference; only authentic construction pertains to how architecture becomes its true original source.

For example, in Wang Shu's specific creative thinking, he mentioned, "The entrance of the South Gate is interesting because it is not on the central axis... because no door in any Chinese garden is straight. This is a reason supported by cultural research. When you look at the South Gate from the front, the gate is partly blocked by a hill. This 'concealing beauty' is a typical Song painting atmosphere." However, bodily experience tells us that when entering a building in reality, one cannot have such an idealized perception because, first of all, the assumption that "when you look at the South Gate from the central axis" does not exist in reality. This is a form of personal experience "appropriation."

The more one advocates that architecture is the product of design concepts, the further one is from actual construction. —Kojin Karatani

3. Specific Creation: Residue of Consciousness

Design is persuasion of others, which means that the final product of design has sufficient contingency, as Wittgenstein said, "Architecture is like a game where rules are made and modified while playing." No architect can predict a building in advance, and a building cannot be separated from its context; it is an event.

Symbols in architecture are inevitable. However, it should be noted that the meaning of architectural symbols is not entirely equivalent to the meaning of symbols in linguistics; they are expressions of the author's understanding of the object. First, basic symbol characteristics are needed to define the object of design as a building rather than a water cup or an eraser. Beyond that, if there are other objects that need to be symbolized, the appropriate symbolic signs can be "appropriated." [6]

However, design is not just a combination of symbols. Merely adhering to the frozen signifier-signified chain does not reveal the true original core of traditional culture; it requires construction and nature—elements that are not included in the symbol network but are inseparable from architecture. In other words, true construction is about how it responds to the events that actually occur in the building. Any actual construction form is dedicated to expressing the spiritual core, but what is interesting is the "form of covering forms" that inevitably appears during construction—the "gap between true construction and the inner image of consciousness" mentioned earlier.

Continuing from where we left off, let's delve into some specific details of the National Version Museum designed by Wang Shu and explore how they relate to the concept of "Oriental Charm."

Entrance Design: Wang Shu's mention of the entrance design not being on the central axis but partially blocked by a hill reflects a deliberate attempt to create an atmosphere reminiscent of Song Dynasty paintings. This approach is a manifestation of his belief that architecture should evoke cultural and historical resonances. However, as previously mentioned, translating such artistic subtleties from a two-dimensional painting to a three-dimensional architectural space can be challenging. The viewer's experience when entering the building may not precisely replicate the idealized perception from a frontal view, leading to a certain degree of abstraction.

Symbolism and Meaning: The use of symbols in architecture is common, but it's important to recognize that architectural symbols don't function exactly like linguistic symbols. While they may represent specific cultural concepts or ideas, they also need to respond to the practical and functional aspects of the building. For example, the incorporation of traditional Chinese architectural elements, such as sloping roofs, wooden lattice screens, and courtyards, can be seen as symbolic gestures toward China's architectural heritage. These elements not only carry cultural connotations but also serve functional purposes.

True Construction and Event: The idea that architecture is an event rather than a predetermined design perfectly aligns with Wang Shu's approach. He often emphasizes that the true essence of a building emerges during its construction process, as unforeseen challenges, materials, and contexts interact. This dynamic approach to architecture is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's idea that architecture is like a game where rules are made and modified while playing. It highlights the importance of embracing contingencies and allowing the building to evolve organically as it takes shape.

Covering Forms and True Construction: The notion of a "gap between true construction and the inner image of consciousness" underscores the complexity of translating abstract concepts like "Oriental Charm" into tangible architectural forms. In the case of the National Version Museum, while the design may draw inspiration from Song Dynasty aesthetics, the real-world constraints of materials, budget, and construction methods inevitably lead to deviations from the idealized vision. This "gap" can be seen as an inherent characteristic of architecture, where the interplay between conceptualization and realization continually shapes the final product.

In summary, Wang Shu's Hangzhou National Version Museum serves as an intriguing case study in the exploration of "Oriental Charm" within contemporary garden architecture. It reflects the challenges of translating abstract cultural concepts into tangible architectural forms

while also embracing the dynamic and event-driven nature of construction. The blending of traditional Chinese architectural elements, symbolism, and a commitment to authenticity contributes to the museum's unique character, inviting visitors to engage with the cultural heritage it represents. Ultimately, the museum stands as a testament to the ongoing dialogue between tradition and innovation in contemporary architecture.

Once we delve into the specifics, are the bathrooms, plumbing installations, lighting arrangements, spatial spans, and even design specifications in the museum solely products of the architect's vision? Probably not. These aspects represent compromises made during the course of the project, similar to how humans have evolved to possess pores for cooling and an anus for excretion, even though cooling and excretion are not the essence of a person. These compromises challenge the modernist notion of the perfect unity of form and function and align with postmodernist critiques of modernism.

It's worth acknowledging that starting with the wooden roof structure of the main building and the variations in the wooden structure within the water pavilion for a 24-meter span (Figure 9), these architectural forms may appear innovative. When audiences interpret architectural symbols, they may identify such structures as a new architectural order because they don't exist within known symbol systems. More importantly, when matching existing construction orders with traditional symbol systems for recognition, traditional concepts are retrospectively marked, allowing tradition to continue.

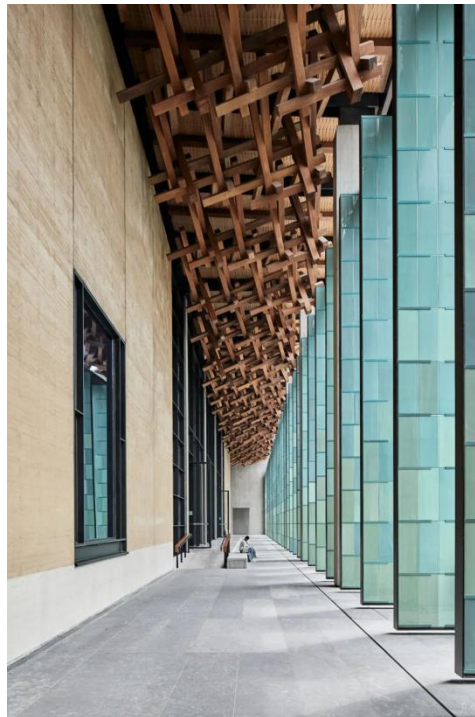


Figure 9. Wooden structure in Hangzhou National Version Museum

4. Conclusions

The examples mentioned earlier tell us that unscathed translation of established "proper names" from one language to another often requires a lengthy process of development. On the one hand, these translated names need to find their own expression forms determined by themselves (The spread of the self), as elaborated earlier about "authentic construction" in gardens, which is precisely the generative logic for a building to become architecture. On the other hand, this newly developed mode of transfer requires a considerable amount of time to dissolve the "intentional" labels and then become a subconscious acceptance. In the modern presentation of Eastern gardens, the former requires designers to strive to find garden forms that fit the new era—more accurately, not fitting but rather continuing to explore how they manifest. These are inherently part of our Eastern cultural community, and after being separated by external forces for some time, they now feel uncomfortable. We need to bring them to the forefront, which points toward the future. Of course, the latter requires the work to stand firm after enduring the tests of time and space.

So those elements added to compensate for the loss in translation can only be partially part of the symbol system, and they are always incomplete, waiting to be supplemented and changed.

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