

# The Iconological Translation of Late Ming Garden Engravings: A Case Study of the Wu Prefecture Edition of The Peony Pavilion

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**Abstract:** This study takes the woodblock engravings from the late Ming Wu Prefecture edition of The Peony Pavilion as its research object. By applying Panofsky's tripartite iconological method, it deconstructs and deeply explores the iconological translation of garden construction scenes in late Ming woodblock engravings. Through analysis of the form, content, and significance of the engravings, this research reveals the presentation methods, cultural implications, and artistic values of garden construction in these engravings. It further enhances our understanding of late Ming garden culture and provides certain translation results that can serve as a reference for classical garden historical translation in contemporary landscape design.

**Keywords:** Late Ming Woodblock Engravings; Garden Construction; Iconological Translation; The Peony Pavilion.

## Introduction:

The late Ming period (1573–1644) was a unique era of multi-dimensional development in Chinese history, politically, economically, and culturally. It was also a time of flourishing popular novel culture and printmaking art. Gardens, serving as a spiritual haven for literati, reflected their aesthetic pursuits and carried rich cultural and symbolic meanings [1]. Woodblock engravings, as an important medium for image dissemination, were widely applied during this period, particularly in the illustrations of literary works. Many of these engravings depicted garden scenes [2]. This study takes the Wu Prefecture edition of The Peony Pavilion as a case study, employing iconological methods to explore how late Ming garden construction techniques are represented in woodblock engravings and analyzing these representations to inspire contemporary design [3].

## 1. Iconological Study Methods for Garden Engravings

### 1.1. Fundamental Concepts of Iconology

Iconology, as a discipline dedicated to the study of the meaning, symbolism, and cultural connotations of images, originated in Germany during the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Through generations of scholarly efforts, it gradually developed into a comprehensive theoretical system and research methodology. As an important approach in art historical research, iconology primarily analyzes image symbols, themes, and symbolic meanings to uncover their deeper cultural connotations. Iconological studies not only focus on images themselves but also examine the relationships between images and texts, as well as social contexts.

### 1.2. Research Methods in Iconology

Iconological research methodologies generally encompass three levels: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. Pre-iconographic description involves describing the basic characteristics of an image, including its composition, color, and lines. Iconographic analysis explores the cultural, historical, and social significances that images represent, revealing the cultural connotations behind them. Iconological interpretation delves into the symbolic meanings and artistic values of images, uncovering the profound meanings and aesthetic values they convey.

### 1.3. Distinctive Features of Iconological Studies on Illustrations in Novels

Woodblock prints, as a medium for image dissemination, possess unique characteristics in iconological research. Firstly, the production process of woodblock prints is influenced by carving techniques, resulting in distinctive lines and textures. Secondly, the context of their circulation and use is also an essential aspect of study, helping to understand the audience and dissemination channels of the images.

The application of iconology in garden image studies is extensive and can be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Through image identification, one can understand the various elements in garden images—such as architecture, plants, landscapes, and human figures—and their arrangement and composition. Analyzing symbols and symbolic meanings in images allows exploration of their cultural backgrounds and the cultural information and symbolism they convey. Visual analysis investigates the compositional techniques of garden images, such as symmetry, balance, and perspective, examining their impact on visual effects [4].

## 2. Garden Images in the Woodblock Illustrations of "The Peony Pavilion"

### 2.1. Historical Background of "The Peony Pavilion"

"The Peony Pavilion" is a masterpiece by Tang Xianzu, a playwright of the Ming Dynasty, recounting the joys and sorrows of the love story between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), with a courtesy name Yiyi and a pseudonym Hai Ruo, was a renowned literary figure and playwright of the Ming Dynasty. "The Peony Pavilion" was created in 1601 and is celebrated for its romantic narrative and elegant prose.

The woodblock illustrations of "The Peony Pavilion" from a late Ming edition not only showcase the garden landscapes of the time but also visually depict the emotional changes of the characters. There are several notable editions of "The Peony Pavilion" from the late Ming period: The Wanli Edition (1598), the earliest known edition, provides a foundation for later studies of "The Peony Pavilion." The Zhu Mo Suite Print Edition (1608), primarily aimed at scholarly officials and collectors, had a positive impact on the development of later printing technologies. The Min Qi gefu Edition (1622), which exerted significant influence on subsequent studies of "The Peony Pavilion." The "Linchuan Four Dreams" version reprinted by the Wujun Book Industry Office is generally considered to be an edition from the Chongzhen period, likely published around 1627. This version is one of the initial prints of Tang Xianzu's original work and holds significant documentary and cultural value. This article selects this version for analysis (as shown in Figure 1). The Shen Jifei Edition, published in the 17th year of the Chongzhen reign (1644), played an important role in the dissemination and study of "The Peony Pavilion."



**Figure 1.** The "Peony Pavilion" section from "Lin Chuan Four Dreams" published by Wujun Book Office

### 2.2. Landscape Elements in "The Peony Pavilion"

Through statistical analysis of the plant life in the woodblock illustrations, the most commonly depicted plants in the garden images, in order, are pine, willow, bamboo, peach, banana, peony and paeony, catalpa, plum, date palm, and orchid. Among these, pine, bamboo, and willow are the most frequent, collectively accounting for about one-third of the plant life depicted. However, some plants like pagoda tree, chrysanthemum, and honeysuckle appear less frequently due to their indistinct morphological features, making them less suitable for depiction in woodblock prints. Overall, the plants that appear most frequently in the illustrations are those commonly used in classical gardens, with distinctive morphological features and ease of representation, such as pine, bamboo, and willow.

Through a statistical analysis of the positioning of rocks and hills in the illustrations, it was found that artificial hills are often placed in gardens, in front of halls, outside bedrooms, by ponds, near pavilions, or as part of miniature landscapes. Among these, water-edge rock formations, particularly those near bridges, flowing water, water dividers, and wave formations, are especially charming [5]. The stacking methods in the

illustrations primarily involve individual placement, group placement, and scattered placement. The way rocks and hills are arranged in conjunction with surrounding buildings and plant life in the illustrations reflects the rock arrangement techniques described in garden literature, such as "using real rocks to create a false impression and vice versa (Ming Ji Cheng)." These techniques demonstrate the maturity of rock arrangement methods during the Ming and Qing periods [6].

Water elements are less prevalent in the woodblock illustrations. Statistical analysis reveals that ponds are often located in courtyards, with regular stone-block revetments and often accompanied by railings. Rivers, lakes, and streams in rural areas typically feature natural-style revetments. Buildings such as rooms, halls, studios, pavilions, and shelters are commonly found near water. Bridges are often constructed over ponds. Many gardens are built adjacent to water sources or incorporate water features within the garden. The most commonly planted trees and flowers near water are willow, pine, bamboo, and peach.

### *2.3. Representation of Garden Construction in "The Peony Pavilion"*

By categorizing and analyzing the spatial types, characteristics, strategies, atmospheres, elements, layers, and dreamscapes in the woodblock illustrations, we arrive at the summary shown in Figure 2. The layouts of the gardens in the illustrations typically employ balanced compositions to emphasize the regularity and order of the gardens. This layout approach aligns with the traditional Chinese garden design philosophy, reflecting the pursuit of symmetry, balance, and harmony in Chinese culture. Furthermore, the garden layouts in the illustrations use techniques such as density, sparsity, and virtual-actual contrasts to create a rich sense of depth and space, allowing viewers to experience the vastness and profundity of the gardens. The architectural elements in the woodblock illustrations often use simple and bold lines to convey the dignity and elegance of the buildings. The architectural styles in the illustrations typically reflect the late Ming style, characterized by flying eaves, upturned corners, intricate door and window designs, and so on. These architectural elements not only demonstrate the advanced level of architectural art during the late Ming period but also reflect the aesthetic preferences of the people at that time. The depictions of plant life in the woodblock illustrations often employ realistic techniques to highlight the shapes and textures of the plants. The plant images in the illustrations frequently exhibit strong folk art characteristics, such as "plum blossoms in the snow (a symbol of resilience)" and "peony and lotus flowers (symbols of wealth and purity) [7]." These plant representations not only reflect the cultural significance of plants in Chinese tradition but also express the people's love and appreciation for natural beauty.

The garden ambiance in the illustrations is often created through the combination and arrangement of various scenic elements, such as the combination of pine and rock or banana and rock, to express the artist's understanding and pursuit of garden ambiance [8]. The garden settings in the illustrations often possess qualities of profundity, subtlety, and ethereal beauty, allowing viewers to experience the cultural connotations and spiritual values embedded in the gardens while enjoying the art. The late Ming garden culture depicted in the illustrations is expressed through the symbolic meanings of scenic elements, conveying the author's interpretation and appreciation of garden culture. The landscape elements in the illustrations often carry rich symbolic meanings, such as screen patterns, potted landscapes, and ground paving. These symbolic meanings not only reflect the understanding and pursuit of natural beauty in Chinese culture but also mirror the societal perceptions and reflections of the time [9].

还魂记	折名	空间类型	空间特点	梦境空间	空间策略	空间氛围	空间要素	空间层次
1	言怀	郊野空间	开敞空间	无	郊野开敞	自由	开石, 梅, 柳, 兰, 云	整体
2	训女	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	严, 屏风, 方椅, 建筑, 槐	前中后
3	堂试	庭院空间	纵深空间	无	建筑纵深	美感	稳, 柳, 松, 建筑, 山, 水	前中后
4	央媒	郊野空间	纵深空间	无	郊野纵深	美感	稳, 建筑, 围栏, 山, 水, 柳, 草, 桥	前中后
5	游园	室内空间	私密空间	庭院空间	室内私密	私密	圆凳, 方桌, 建筑, 亭, 柳, 石, 兰	整体
6	鹄遇	室内空间	私密空间	室内空间	室内私密	私密	松, 草, 建筑, 花瓶, 蜡台, 酒具, 盆景	整体
7	寻梦	庭院空间	半开敞	无	亭子半开	自由	亭, 柳, 石	整体
8	诘病	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	杂乱	屏风, 方椅, 建筑, 方凳, 柱子, 置石, 盆栽, 桌案	前中后
9	写真	室内空间	私密空间	无	室内私密	私密	床, 高低方桌, 花瓶, 笔砚, 置石	前中后
10	牝贼	郊野空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	置石, 旗, 枪, 山, 兰, 屏风	前中后
11	悼伤	庭院空间	开敞空间	无	置石开敞	自由	松, 梅, 石, 栏杆	整体
12	旅寄	郊野空间	纵深空间	无	水面纵深	自由	桥, 石, 建筑, 水, 山, 植物	前中后
13	冥判	室内空间	私密空间	室内空间	室内私密	私密	鬼怪, 武器, 屏风, 笔砚, 桌, 柱子	整体
14	玩真	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	屏风, 圆凳, 长桌, 笔墨砚, 书, 竹子, 置石	前中后
15	魂游	室内空间	私密空间	无	室内私密	私密	插花花瓶, 烛台, 方椅, 长桌, 松	前后
16	贞女	庭院空间	开敞空间	无	置石开敞	稳定	置石, 方桌, 烛台, 插画花瓶, 植物, 佛像	前中后
17	幽媾	室内空间	私密空间	室内空间	室内私密	私密	圆凳, 方桌, 床, 置石, 云, 月亮, 北斗七星, 植物, 笔墨, 烛台	前中后
18	缮备	城墙空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	旗帜, 屏风, 武器, 置石, 方桌, 碗筷	前中后
19	秘议	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	植物, 屏风, 椅子	前中后
20	冥誓	庭院空间	半开敞	无	亭子半开	稳定	亭子, 植物, 置石	前后
21	移镇	郊野空间	纵深空间	无	水面纵深	美感	节, 船, 水, 山, 马, 旗子, 植物	前中后
22	婚走	郊野空间	纵深空间	无	水面纵深	美感	稳, 山, 水, 植物, 船, 伞, 建筑	前中后
23	驷变	庭院空间	半开敞	无	置石半开	稳定	置石, 植物, 栏杆	前中后
24	如杭	城墙空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	桥, 水, 植物, 石, 建筑	前中后
25	寇间	郊野空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	屏风, 旗帜, 兵器, 石	前中后
26	耽试	庭院空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	柳, 建筑	整体
27	折寇	城墙空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	植物, 兵器, 旗帜, 建筑	整体
28	急难	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	伞, 植物, 圆凳, 屏风, 石	整体
29	词药	郊野空间	开敞空间	无	水面纵深	自由	植物, 船, 水, 旗子	前中后
30	遇母	庭院空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	自由	松, 建筑, 石, 山, 月亮, 星星	前中后
31	雨宴	室内空间	私密空间	无	室内私密	私密	屏风, 方桌, 餐具, 酒器	整体
32	榜下	城墙空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	城墙建筑	整体
33	硬拷	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	植物, 置石, 围栏, 屏风, 椅子, 棍子	前中后
34	闻喜	庭院空间	半开敞	无	屏风半开	稳定	屏风, 植物, 石	前后
35	园驾	庭院空间	半开敞	无	建筑半开	稳定	屏风, 松, 置石, 门头	前中后

Figure 2: The Peony Pavilion - Summary of Garden Space (Drawn by the author)

3. The Translated Iconology of Garden Creation in the Woodcut Edition of "The Peony Pavilion"

3.1. Unique Spatial Layout and Touring Paths

"The Peony Pavilion" features a variety of spatial forms, including farmland spaces, garden spaces, dreamscapes, suburban spaces, and interior spaces. These spatial forms not only enrich the narrative layers but also provide abundant visual and imaginative spaces for garden design. The illustrations in "The Peony Pavilion" reveal the ambiguity of spatial boundaries through an "interplay between the virtual and the real" (Figure 3). The fluidity and uncertainty of spatial boundaries between the image and reality can be achieved in garden design through the use of landscape screening, perspective, and guidance, thereby enhancing the mystery and exploratory nature of the space. The garden spaces in the illustrations are organized into foreground, mid-ground, and background, creating a layered sense of space [10]. This layering can be realized in practical garden design through the arrangement of plants at varying heights, the serpentine design of paths, and the placement of landscape features, thereby strengthening the depth and three-dimensionality of the space. The fluidity and openness of garden spaces are also evident in "The Peony Pavilion" illustrations. The movement and interaction of characters within the space make the spatial boundaries no longer closed and fixed but adaptable to the needs of the plot [11]. In practical garden design, this fluidity can be achieved through open spatial layouts and flexible path designs.

In the woodcut depicting Liu Mengmei's dreamlike search, the scene primarily showcases Liu Mengmei's journey through the garden. Dressed in simple attire, Liu Mengmei moves solemnly through the garden, which is adorned with winding corridors flanked by pine and bamboo, secluded and mysterious pavilions, and deep artificial mountains and rocks, forming a garden space filled with an atmosphere of mystery and exploration. The garden layout in this woodcut emphasizes the characteristics of winding paths and seclusion, with meandering routes, pine and bamboo obstructing the view, and hidden pavilions and artificial mountains, evoking a sense of seeking and exploring the hidden. This layout not only aligns with Liu Mengmei's psychological state as he searches for Du Liniang but also symbolizes his pursuit of and faith in a beautiful life [12]. The pine and bamboo in the scene symbolize resilience and perseverance, while the secluded pavilions and artificial mountains hint at Liu Mengmei's inner world and expectations for the future.





**Figure 3.** Partial Woodcuts from "The Peony Pavilion"

### 3.2. Special Ambience Creation and Emotional Expression

The woodcut illustrations feature small potted landscapes such as miniature pines, bamboo, and iris plants, which are plants cherished by literati. Among these, bamboo and iris are often combined with stones to convey a certain level of poetic charm. These landscaping techniques are highly refined and carry symbolic meanings, as these plants are endowed with the virtues of "junque in the character of a gentleman," symbolizing integrity and moral fiber [13]. As a result, they have become popular choices for exchange among the wealthy and scholars, serving as visual testimonies to the fashion of miniature landscapes during the late Ming period (Figure 4).

In the woodcut illustrations, architectural boundaries are often paired with specific plants to reflect the literati's aesthetic. The depiction in the woodcuts considers the human perspective and the viewpoint within the physical space, creating landscapes through plants seen outside windows (Figure 5). This approach resembles the planting of plants around buildings in classical Chinese gardens, where plants are selected either for their poetic connotations or symbolic meanings, rather than merely for greenification. For example, the "Guihua Xuan" (Osmanthus Pavilion) in Liu Yuan is surrounded by osmanthus trees. When the osmanthus blossoms, its fragrance fills the air, reminiscent of the Zen story of enlightenment through the scent of osmanthus [14]. According to "Luohu Wild Records," when Huang Luzhi visited the monk Huidang, he experienced a moment of enlightenment upon smelling the osmanthus, symbolizing the comprehension of the universal and eternal truth of life. The charm of borrowing objects to convey ideas and the profound expression of using language to hint at deep and subtle states are reminiscent of the lyrical quality found in landscape writing [15].



**Figure 4.** Potted Plant Arrangements in "The Peony Pavilion"



**Figure 5.** Plants by the Window in "The Peony Pavilion"

### 3.3. Emphasizing the Fusion of Nature and Humanity

The woodcut illustrations frequently depict atmospheric expressions in spaces outside of buildings. The essence of architecture often lies beyond the building itself, and the brilliance of landscape spaces is frequently expressed through their ability to connect with the outside, as seen in the woodcuts capturing scenes of ascending heights to gaze at the view, appreciating the moon, or listening to the wind. These are also classic images in traditional Chinese aesthetics, emphasizing contact between humans and nature (Figure 6).

In the semi-open spaces of the woodcut illustrations, screens are the most frequently appearing decorative items [16]. Screens often symbolize the ambiguity of real and fictional spaces, reflecting the dual expression of literati's thoughts on mountains and waters. Although the scenes depicted on screens are fictional, they do not diminish the impact of screens on spatial creation and their ability to extend limited spaces infinitely. In the woodcuts, the spatial atmosphere is often represented by ripple-patterned screens, embodying the grandeur of the sky and the vastness of the sea, evoking feelings akin to "the courage to observe the waves, the vastness of the ocean, and the grandeur of mountains and rivers [17]." "Ripple screens" are rich in imagery and ambiance, with pure forms and profound content, making them one of the classic images in Chinese classical aesthetics (Figure 7).



**Figure 6.** Ascending Heights in "The Peony Pavilion"





**Figure 7.** Screen Decorations in "The Peony Pavilion"

#### 4. Conclusion

"The Peony Pavilion," as a characteristic of secular novels, presents its story through the combination of images and texts. The garden landscape illustrations it contains possess narrative attributes of landscapes, conveying the story through spatial perspectives and allowing people to experience and gain emotional resonance from the narrative within the visual space [18]. According to iconology principles, the structure of its illustrations can be primarily divided into three parts: landscape subjects (including plants, architecture, rocks, and water bodies), landscape meanings (cultural objects symbolized by elements like artificial hills and water, plants, etc.), and recipients (readers or viewers).

Through iconological analysis, the garden landscape illustrations in the woodblock prints consist of explicit carriers and implicit meanings. By organizing landscape elements in a specific way, they convey the artistic conception, allowing people to experience the themes and atmospheres. The patterns on screens point to mountains and water, spatial transitions lead to mountains and water, spatial layouts are oriented towards mountains and water, and garden elements also direct towards mountains and water. The construction of gardens in these woodblock illustrations is aimed at expressing artistic conceptions and emotions, rather than techniques of garden construction. The spatial layout blurs the boundaries between reality and illusion, which is exactly the depth that contemporary landscape design needs. With the rapid development of new materials and technologies, we have constructions like sponge cities, rainwater gardens, and smart parks. However, how can we maintain the indigenous characteristics of Chinese gardens and create garden landscapes with Chinese features? It requires inheriting these classical garden cultural expressions and connotations to achieve translational design. By understanding and applying these traditional elements, contemporary landscape design can continue to evolve while preserving the essence of classic Chinese aesthetics.

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