

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## A Basic Study on the Characteristics of Traditional Garden Landscapes of Inner Mongolia

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### Abstract

In order to preserve the traditional garden landscape and maintain the harmony between traditional and modern gardens of Inner Mongolia, this study theoretically examined the creation and background elements of Inner Mongolia, and reviewed the nature of the people and the traditional design elements. The results of this study show that: 1) the background factor of traditional garden landscapes was nomadic life in plains, which was a lifestyle of adapting to Mother Nature and promoting mutual existence and survival; 2) Shamanism impacted the views of nature among the ancient Inner Mongolian people; 3) traditional garden landscapes could be categorized into landscapes centered around Mother Nature during the Huns era and those centered around the symbolic landscape during the Genghis Khan era; 4) aesthetic elements of traditional garden landscapes included traditional colors of red, yellow, sky-blue, milky-white, and traditional patterns of external knot, cloud, bull horn, and plain grass. These findings may provide basic data for the creation background and characteristics of traditional garden landscape of Inner Mongolia in the application of the green space design of Inner Mongolia.

**Key words** : Inner Mongolian, Traditional landscape, Nomadic life, Mother-Nature, Colors and designs

### 1. Introduction

Traditional garden landscapes reflect the historicity of the nation and the culture of the people, being an important element in the preservation and inheritance of traditional culture. As the design of modern garden landscape becomes increasingly complex by reflecting the local culture, traditional architecture, history and ethic appearance along with Western design methods, the space of modern landscaping has underlying similarities to traditional garden landscapes (Kim and Ryu, 2006).

One of the most prominent of the 55 minority races across China, Inner Mongolia has its traditional garden landscapes whose preservation values are extremely high as the representative spae of ethnic culture that inherit and transmit its nomadic culture (Kim, 2012). Being considered as the archetype of Inner Mongolian parks, the traditional garden landscape are excessively exposed to development and damage according to the rapid globalization and urbanization of the country and thus face problems both in quality and quantity. That is, Western materials and styles have gradually replaced the unique traditional techniques and

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landscape elements of the country in many design spaces of modern landscaping, thus bringing changes to their external forms. Some designers, for instance, lack of an understanding of traditional ideology and culture with respect to the traditional cultural signs of Inner Mongolia frequently used in modern garden landscapes and accordingly express or copy them in wrong ways, thus causing damage to the authenticity and value of cultural signs in many cases. Including the incompleteness of historical materials, shortage of research, and absence of preservation policies according to the development-centric system regarding the traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia, the immediate issues are expected to have direct impacts on the damage and loss of traditional garden landscapes.

It is required to understand and analyze the traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia accurately including their characteristics and components in order to preserve them in the paradigm of sustainable future-oriented development and to maintain the harmony between traditional and modern gardens. As a basic study on the characteristics of traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia, this study theoretically examined their creation and background elements including the geographical environments of the country, the reviews of nature of its people, and the traditional design elements through literature analysis. The findings will hopefully contribute to the preservation and transmission of traditional garden landscapes of the Mongol and the right understanding and application of traditional garden landscapes in the design of its modern garden landscapes.

## 2. Materials and Method

Aiming to understand and interpret the characteristics of the unique traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia, the study first sorted out the basic data about

the geographical environments of Inner Mongolia, which contribute to the traditional landscapes, and nomadic life, which is the principal life landscape. It then analyzed the changing process of traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia according to the times by taking into account that they were created and developed in different ways in different periods and had different styles and features. It also examined the views of nature and spaces of living among the people of Inner Mongolia and analyzed the traditional design elements that had developed and changed accordingly. The time and space research scope was restricted to the entire history and autonomous region of Inner Mongolia to conduct a total analysis of general characteristic of its traditional garden landscapes. Those theoretical examinations were based on the collection and analysis of literature data about the history, religion and faith, culture and art of ancient Inner Mongolia.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Backgrounds of creation

#### 3.1.1. Geographical environments

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region lies in the grassland of Eurasia between 40 and 60 degrees north. It has high plains that are approximately 1,000 m above sea level. Its weather is hot and dry in summer and cold and dry in winter, giving it a typical continental climate. The plains are mainly distributed in the highlands of western Da Hinghan Ling and northern Yinshan and Helanshan, in the mountain hills of border areas, and in the Ordos plateau (Fig. 1). The total area of its plains amounts to 88 million hectares with rich and various types of land and colorful landscapes (Lee, 2011; Lee, 2012; Ma, 1997).

#### 3.1.2. Nomadic life

It was in the plains where nomadic life, the ancient lifestyle of the Mongol, was created. It later became the



Fig. 1. Geographical location of Inner Mongolia (Lee, 2012).



Fig. 2. The Shaman.

source of traditional garden landscape of Inner Mongolia. Nomadic life is a style of ranching that spread around the Old World and lifestyle of taming herbivorous ungulate mammals and moving them around periodically as people move (Jeong, 2008). Nomads cannot help choosing the nomadic life of moving from one place to another in search of grass and water along with their livestock because their livestock needs to adapt to the climate according to seasonal changes. In a harsh environment, they need to adjust to the biorhythms of livestock and climate changes while preserving the ecology of plains that provide food for the livestock. In other words, they prevent the plains from being destroyed by moving from one place to another and thus ensure the structure of reproduction to use the plains again later, which is an important reason for nomadic life. Annual precipitation is 50 mm in the western region mainly comprised of deserts and 500 mm in the eastern region containing many plains. Since precipitation is low and the land is poor, it takes a considerable time for grassland to recover after destruction. The nomads thus move from one place to another according to the biorhythms of livestock to protect the grassland.

Nomadic life in the plains reflects the lifestyle of

adapting and changing to Mother Nature for survival and living. The plain landscape can all be understood as the living spaces of ancient Inner Mongolia. That is, people in ancient Inner Mongolia created traditional garden landscapes of harmonious mutual existence and survival through their interactions with Mother Nature.

### 3.1.3. Religion

Shamanism is the unique primitive religion of the Mongols. Shamanism believes that all things in the world have life and spirit and that holy deities rule the sun, the moon, and the stars, thunder and lightning, and mountains, streams, and trees.

It finds the root of everything in Heaven and Earth and reflects the unique perception of relations between man and nature among the Mongol. Leading a long nomadic life, nomads come to believe that all things are connected with people and make up a whole with them and regard nature as ultimate origin of life. All things in the world belong to Heaven and Earth, and Mother Nature is considered as the cradle of all creations including people. Fig. 2 shows a person praying to Heaven, offering fresh milk. Harmonious life between man and nature is one of characteristics of traditional Mongolian garden landscapes.

### 3.2. Characteristics of traditional garden landscapes according to changes of the times

#### 3.2.1. Mother nature–centric traditional garden landscape

The basic way of life among the Huns was nomadic life circulating between certain plains of Mongolia regularly, taming livestock, and getting resources for life from their livestock. They changed their ranches every season, always led a continuous nomadic life in nature, and chose their abode in the background of the plains. Containing data about the ancient Mongol, the Secret History of the Mongol recorded that nomads would be exposed for life to such landscapes as the vast green plains, meandering rivers, the warm sun, and the distant mountains and streams that were always undulating. The ancient Mongol were able to obtain and consume life and products in the plains during their long stay in them, keeping a lifestyle based on the ecological ideology of adapting to the law of Mother Nature (Yu, 2007).

#### 3.2.2. Traditional garden landscape in symbolic forms

In 1206, Genghis Khan unified the different Mongolian village that led a ranching life into a nation. In his empire, different forms of landscape emerged from the traditional ones formed by Mother Nature. Genghis Khan expanded the territory, reinforced cultural exchanges with the rest of the world, and was especially active with introducing Chinese culture (Meng, 1999). In ancient Mongolia, they placed the military gear of the Commander at the utmost enter of military camp during a march operation, thus clearly showing that he was the center of power there (Rene Grousset, 2007). They also built provincial capitals to symbolize the dignity of power and fused their ideologies with those of Taoism including “Inbeopji, Jibeopcheon, Cheonbeopdo, and Beopdojayeon” to implement urban planning based on nature and its mountains and rivers (Fig. 3, Hu, 2005).

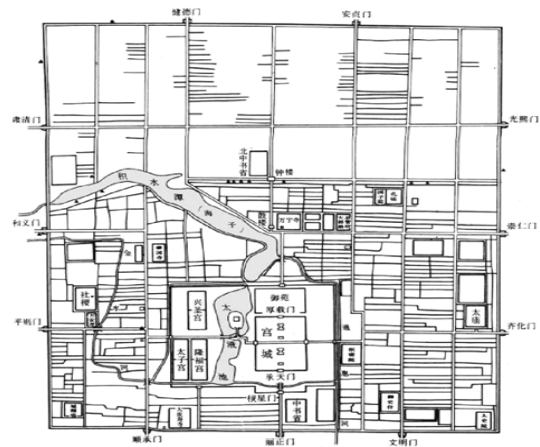







Fig. 3. Urban planning map of Genghis Khan dynasty.

### 3.3. Detailed elements of traditional garden landscapes

#### 3.3.1. Traditional colors

The colors preferred by an ethnic group are tremendously influenced by their social and living styles and natural environments. The Mongols' interest in colors was closely related to the elements of their natural environment. In ancient Mongolia, they developed a preference for red, yellow (gold and ochre), sky blue, and white (milky white). They preferred red because it represented the warmth of fire, life force of blood, and origin of all creations of the sun. As the dynasty of Genghis Khan was called the golden family, gold in the yellow line was often used in the imperial palace and considered as a noble color. They believed that the sunlight of gold would bring eternal light and hope. Ochre was considered as a solemn symbolic color that derived from the earth color of the plains. Sky blue represented the blue sky that would expand to no end in the plains, being preferred by the Mongols. Milky white was preferred by the Mongols because they usually consumed dairy products and were the same color as the Ger, one of daily necessities of nomads. The people of Inner Mongolia regarded milky white as a color to bring them a sense of stability and happiness (Li and Zhou, 2012). Those traditional colors are reflected in modern

**Table 1.** Examples applied traditional colors

Colors	(a) Red	(b) Gold	(c) Ochre	(d) Sky blue	(e) Milky white
Examples					
	Grand theatre of Mongolia	The National Cultural Bureau	Roofs of the Mongol national stadiums	S building in Mongolia	Ger

garden landscapes: the Grand Theatre of Mongolia was built of red bricks; the roofs of the National Cultural Bureau were in gold to represent the light of hope; the stadiums were painted in ochre to represent the exercise-centric environment and harmony; and the tall building S used sky blue to represent oneness with Heaven (Table 1).

3.3.2. Traditional decorations

The landscapes of Mother Nature affected the aesthetics of the Mongols, who developed their own unique aesthetic senses that were reflected in their designs and costumes. The designs used in their traditional decorations are found in their food, clothing, and shelter and also their traveling (for their nomadic life). The designs that were used universally include external knot patterns, cloud patterns bull horn patterns, and plain grass patterns (Table 2). Additional designs include the dragon, phoenix, mountain, water, fire, and vortex. Those designs have vitality in their forms, reflect the natural, frank, and humble nature of

the Mongols that are concise and explicit, and serve as lucky omens.

3.3.3. Proportions

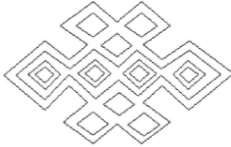



There is similar classical beauty in the history of the Mongols. One good example is the Ger, their mobile adobe, which has a gold proportion of 8:5 or 13:8 for structural and numerical relations. The golden proportion makes people feel stable, safe, and comfortable and forms the beauty of traditional garden landscapes (Dai, 1996).

3.3.4. Order and texture

The beauty of order found in the traditional garden landscape of the Mongol stemmed from natural beauty. The Mongol lived in Mother Nature and observed and made contact with trees and flowers, thus discovering the beauty of order in the geometry of natural element forms in repetition and symmetry.

The tree is the most commonly used material in the plains. It has its own symbol and a gentle texture. People find the trees very familiar, and their texture

**Table 2.** Traditional design patterns

(a) External knot	(b) Cloud pattern	(c) Bull horn pattern	(d) Plain grass pattern
			

reflects the characteristics of Mother Nature that people love to come in contact with.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings about the factors and characteristics of traditional garden landscapes indicate that nomadic life in the plains were a way of life of adapting to Mother Nature and promoting mutual existence and survival, which became a background factor of traditional garden landscapes. Shamanism, which believes that all things in the world have life, had impacts on the views of nature among the people of ancient Inner Mongolia that held nature as sacred. The traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia are categorized into the ones centered around Mother Nature by the Huns that led a nomadic life and the ones centered around the symbolic landscape of the Genghis Khan era when a city state was built. The detailed aesthetic elements of traditional garden landscape that have been transmitted today include the traditional colors of red, yellow, sky blue, and milky white, traditional patterns in the shapes of the external knot, cloud, bull horn, and plain grass, the golden proportion reflected in the traditional architecture of Ger, and the order and texture based on the circulation of Mother Nature and the forms of natural objects.

Those findings will provide a basic data for the creation background and characteristics of traditional garden landscapes of Inner Mongolia. It is required to conduct more multifaceted and profound theoretical analysis of periodic characteristics and views of nature for the right understanding, preservation, and application of traditional garden landscapes. It is also needed to analyze cases of traditional garden landscapes introduced in modern garden landscapes and thus search for their practical application solutions.

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