

Imperial Landscapes in Maps: Insights from Paintings of Rehe Imperial Palace to Modern Tourist Map

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Abstract: *This research analyzed the visual elements of two Chinese landscape paintings of the Rehe Imperial Palace in the Qing dynasties. Using qualitative methods, including visual analysis and case study, the research examines differences in color, perspective, brushwork, and shared philosophical concepts to uncover their potential applications. Through discussing the modern tourist map of the Mountain Resort, the findings bridge the gap between traditional landscape paintings and modern tourist map design, offering practical insights for enhancing the cultural and artistic aspects of tourist maps, particularly those associated with Chinese imperial landscapes.*

Keywords: imperial landscape, tourist map, landscape painting, map design

1. Introduction

The Rehe Imperial Palace near Beijing was a vacation retreat for Qing emperors. Initially commissioned by the Emperor Kangxi in 1703, its construction extended through the 18th century and was completed in 1792, establishing it as China's most extensive royal garden. Each summer, the emperor would depart from Beijing with a grand entourage, including the Baqi military forces, traversing the Gubeikou Great Wall to spend briefly at the summer resort away from the capital. By the Mid-Autumn Festival, the group would move northward to the Mulan Paddock for hunting expeditions, serving as military training and displaying military prowess (Whiteman, 2020).

The Qing Dynasty emperors were very keen to let painters draw their palaces. Therefore, modern scholars can infer the painting years by different architecture in different periods. The paintings of the Imperial Palace exist in multiple versions created by different painters. The Library of Congress holds two versions: one is a blue-green landscape-style map believed to have been completed during Emperor Qianlong's reign (1736–1776) (Figure 1), and Guan Nianci painted the other during Emperor Guangxu's reign (1875–1890) (Figure 2). The Taipei National Palace Museum also preserves two versions, one in ink and the other in color, dating to the Qianlong Emperor's reign. However, due to the lack of clear and accessible data for these versions, the analysis focuses on the maps housed in the Library of Congress. From these paintings in the Qing Dynasty, we can see the prosperity of the imperial landscapes at that time.

With the development of modern tourism, the Rehe Imperial Palace was developed as a tourist attraction and renamed The Mountain Resort of Chengde. As a well-preserved cultural heritage handed down from the Qing Dynasty, the tourist map of the Mountain Resort is an important part of understanding this scenic spot. In 1994, the Mountain Resort and its surrounding temples were listed on the World Cultural Heritage list by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

This research explores the visual characteristics and artistic value of Rehe Imperial Palace paintings, focusing on their unique elements such as composition, color, and brush techniques. By examining these features through the lens of traditional Chinese painting theories, this study seeks to uncover visual principles that can guide modern tourist map design, especially the tourist maps for some imperial landscape attractions. Furthermore, the research aims to bridge traditional and contemporary practices by investigating how integrating historical and artistic elements can enhance the cultural and functional aspects of modern tourist maps, ultimately promoting the application and innovation of cultural heritage in contemporary design.



Figure 1: Map of Rehe Imperial Palace (1736-1776), Source: Reading Digital Atlas, Library of Congress



Figure 2: Map of Rehe Imperial Palace (1875-1890), Source: Reading Digital Atlas, Library of Congress

2. Literature Review

Imperial Landscapes Painting and Mapping Landscape

Whiteman (2013) defined the term “Imperial Landscapes” as encompassing all types of designed landscapes created by the court for imperial purposes. This includes gardens, palaces, temples, and similar spaces, specifically focusing on gardens and their related forms (Whiteman, 2013). They are considered the hubs of political rights, cultural expression, and

social hierarchy, designed to reflect the value of imperial aesthetics (Thomas, 2009). Wang Yong describes landscape painting as an artistic form that developed from functional maps (Wang, 1958). In the Ming Dynasty encyclopedia *Atlas Sancai Tuhui* (1607 AD), authored by Wang Qi and Wang Siyi, landscape paintings, grid-based maps, and hybrid maps that integrate pictorial elements are all included within the volume of “Geography” (Yee, 1994). Many maps from history are by very famous painters who express their understanding of geography in maps through traditional Chinese painting techniques. Arosteguy (2022) regards this creation as an artistic expression of geography, which highlights the internal artistic power of geography (Arosteguy, 2022). These imperial landscape paintings are also considered a kind of map.

Rawson (2002) stated that maps were one of the roots of landscape painting (Rawson, 2002). Given the historical association between Chinese landscape painting and maps, it is imperative to consider the methods employed in Chinese landscape painting and the map's components when discussing visual elements. Mountains and rivers are the primary subjects depicted in Chinese landscape paintings. Painters can express their feelings toward artistic expression and their own personal experiences by employing numerous techniques of landscape paintings.

Visual Elements in Chinese Painting Theories

Chinese painting has long been guided by renowned theories, such as Xie He's “Six Principles” (6th century AD), Jing Hao's “Six Essentials” (8th century AD), Guo Xi's “Three Distances” and “Si Ke” (10th century AD) painting theories, which have profoundly influenced the visual representation of landscapes. These painting theories emphasize the harmonious relationship between nature and humanity and the use of brushwork, color, composition, and philosophic concepts. Applying these theories to the analysis of Rehe Imperial Palace paintings reveals how traditional artistic concepts were integrated into their visual language. This research investigates the colors, brushwork techniques, perspectives, and compositions based on these theories. The texture is depicted in various forms in Chinese paintings, referred to as “Texture (Cun).” Some articles also translate “Texture (Cun)” as “Wrinkle,” which conveys the texture of rocks, trees, and other landscapes. Der-Lor Way (2006) researches six primary texture examples in Chinese landscape painting (Figure 3), such as Hemp-fiber stroke, Axe-cut stroke, Lotus-leaf stroke, Raindrop stroke, and so on (Way & Shih, 2006). The application of dots, lines, and planes is a general summary of the highly diverse use of brushwork in Chinese painting. The tip of the brush is employed to generate the texture of mountains and trees using dots. Lines illustrate the contours and flow of mountains, while planes are created by combining water and ink in precise proportions to create a specific atmosphere.

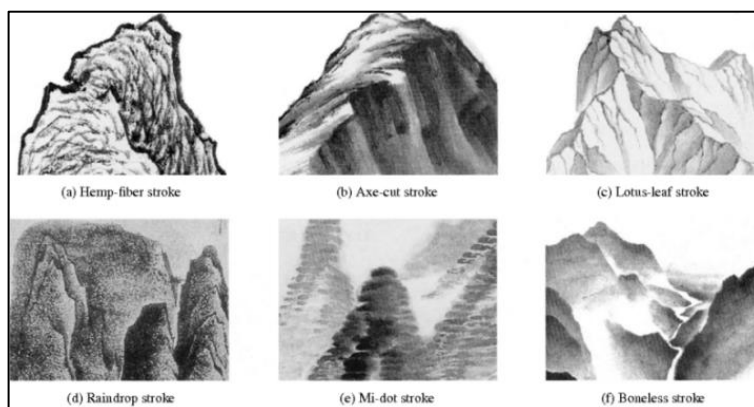


Figure 3: Six Main Techniques of “Cun” in Chinese Landscape Painting, Source: Plate from the article by Der-Lor Way, 2006

Chinese painting is referred to as “Danqing,” meaning “cinnabar-red and cyan,” highlighting the significance of color in an artistic form (Bogushevskaya, 2023). The subject's characteristics are depicted in Chinese painting through the use of color rather than light and shading effects. Artists can employ green on foliage and trees, gray on stones, and blue on water to depict the qualities of these natural components. Additionally, color can enhance the prominence of a primary subject or generate a perspective illusion, resulting in more vivid objects near the viewers (Gambarov, 2006). The literature of the Eastern Zhou to Han period contains the first formal color categorization, which references the “five colors”: white, red, yellow, grue (blue-green), and black. The fourth principle of Xie He's landscape painting principles is “According (adapting) to kind, set forth (describe) co(appearances)” (Cahill, 1961). The significance of this concept is to associate distinct colors with distinct categories of objects based on the actuality of this category conception. It does not refer to a specific object or objects in a specific environment but rather to distinct objects that are identical or similar.

In Western art, the term “perspective” refers to the practice of representing objects in space from an imagined vantage point. There exists a unique form of “sightseeing” in China. Kwo (2012) stated that the Chinese understanding of perspective, in contrast to the scientific perspective of the West, is an idealistic or supra-realistic approach, allowing for the depiction of more than what is visible to the human eye. The composition features a hierarchy of planes or a two-dimensional perspective (Kwo, 2012). Most Chinese paintings contain Taoist concepts, that is, the pursuit of the natural flow of vitality in the paintings. James F. Cahill (1961) elucidates that “Vital Breath (qi)” constitutes the essence of a painting, serving as both a visual representation of its theme and a manifestation of its dynamic spirit and internal energy (Cahill, 1961). Landscape painting emphasizes “rhyme” as the central concept of the artwork. It illustrates the pursuit of a meaningful existence by integrating subjective imagination and objective perception, guided by the painter's “thought.”

The composition of paintings includes the interaction of colors, shading and light structures, and object placement, all of which reflect the painters' specific innovative goals (Zheng et al., 2015). The fifth principle of Xie He is called “Dividing and planning, positioning and arranging,” which means the elements in the painting should be arranged with suitable spatial logic and relationships (Chávez, 2023).

Tourist Map Design

A tourist map is a practical tool for planning tourist activities, navigating, and introducing knowledge of attractions (Farías, 2011). In addition to these practical uses for tourists, Hanna and Del Casino (2003) see them as artifacts intertwined with the generation and reproduction of social and cultural identities (Hanna & Del Casino, 2003). Tourists have widely popularized the tourist map using the visual elements from traditional painting in recent years because it conveys the traditional vision and transmits the internal content of culture and history.

The visual elements of Chinese landscape painting, including color, composition, brushwork, and perspective, offer insights into those employed in tourist maps. At present, many scholars have studied the design of tourist maps from the perspective of traditional aesthetic and visual elements. Weng (2020) combines spatial narrative design with traditional Chinese traditional cultural elements to study the tourist map of Xi'an city (Weng et al., 2020). He, XH (2022) uses the local chronicles and atlas of Dengfeng City to guide the design of tourist maps (He et al., 2022). With the development of technology, more kinds of technology, such as AR, VR, and AI, are integrated into tourist map design. For example, Hong (2022) creates an interactive map of “Shuiningtang,” a historical location in Wuxi City, by integrating cultural resources (Hong, 2022). In the new era, the tourism map design should be compatible with the unity of tourism information, traditional culture, and visual aesthetics.

3. Methodology

This research uses the qualitative method to investigate the visual characteristics in these two Rehe Imperial Landscape paintings. The visual characteristics based on the Chinese landscape painting theories can be examined in depth through comparative analysis. Merriam emphasizes the fundamental study of how people make meaning as the core of qualitative research. It underscores its emphasis on the construction of meaning by individuals, thereby establishing the foundation for a more in-depth discussion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining visual analysis and case study methods. By focusing on two ancient maps as case studies, the research examines their use of visual elements such as color, composition, and symbolism. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the differences in artistic techniques and cultural expressions embedded in these paintings.

4. Data Analysis

Different in Perspective

The viewing perspective of the two paintings is different, with the former using a bird's eye view, while the latter using Guo Xi's theory of “Three Distance.” The former perspective resembles a bird looking out over the whole Rehe Imperial Palace. There is a slight change in the expression of the foreground and background view due to the bird's-eye view, so there will be no obvious foreshortening in the painting. On the other hand, the latter perspective is “Deep Distance” by Guo Xi, which gives the impression of being perched on a lofty mountain that overlooks the palace. The background mountains only outline with the lines and dye gently with color, which makes it easier to distinguish the difference between foreground and background.

Different in Colors

The colors of blue-green landscape paintings are mainly blue, green, and ochre. Compared with other blue-green landscape paintings, red is more proportional in this map because this map was painted for the royal palace. In the Qing Dynasty, royal buildings mostly used red as the primary color of the building walls. Red is mostly in blue-green landscape paintings as an ornament color, such as a bit of red in the flowers and a little red on the feather of a bird, rarely appearing more in proportion. This was also a concession that the royal painting had to make, but the painter did not use the positive red color but chose the red with a lower lightness. The map of Rehe Imperial Palace painted in the Guangxu period is more inclined to the elaborate-style painting, with more details and richer colors. Taking the Fushou Temple as an example, the roofs and the tower are painted using gold paint, which can make the temple appear solemn and sacred (Figure 4).




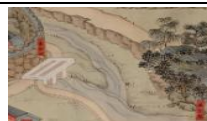







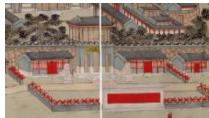










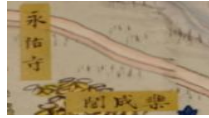
Figure 4: Gold Roof in Partial of Fushou Temple, Source: Reading Digital Atlas, Library of Congress

Different Techniques of Brushwork

Compared with the two maps, the former follows the style of blue-green landscape painting, emphasizing color rendering and describing less of the details; the latter pays more attention to the details of the objects themselves, from the structure of the buildings to the shapes of the leaves. In drawing the rivers, the former used a light blue linear ribbon instead of the river; the latter, after the outline, used curved lines to represent the direction of the water. In drawing the lake, the former used light green ovals of varying sizes to refer to the duckweed in the lake; the latter still used lines to outline the pond's ripples. Regarding rivers and lakes, the latter prefers to use lines to depict details, and the former is better at referring to objects with shapes. When it comes to drawing architecture, the former is more detailed, from palaces to ordinary houses, while the latter captures more distinctive buildings and just uses simple lines to represent rows of houses (Table 1)

Table 1: The Comparison Between Two Maps

Objects		Map of Rehe Imperial Palace (1736-1776)	Map of Rehe Imperial Palace (1875-1890)
Landscape	Mountains		
	Rivers		
	Lake		

	Trees		
Architecture	Gate		
	Religion Building		
	Pagoda		
	Palace		
	Ordinary Residence		
Animals			None
Signage			

In addition to the different painting styles of natural landscapes, the latter paintings from 1875-1890 also adopted the artistic characteristics of boundary painting. Boundary painting, also known as Jie Hua, is a Chinese painting characterized by using a ruler to depict architectural structures. It initially emerged during the Northern Song Dynasty, utilizing a ruler-like instrument known as Jiechi to adorn dwellings, pavilions, pagodas, and various structures. This ruler is a bamboo strip approximately two-thirds the length of a paintbrush, including one rounded edge and a groove on the opposite side. Furthermore, perspective is a defining quality of this type of painting. Nonetheless, the boundary painting adheres to the scatter viewpoint, which is aligned with the viewers.

Similarity of the Inner Concept

Although these two maps exhibit significant differences in painting techniques, they share similarities in their underlying philosophical concepts. Firstly, both maps depict roughly the same geographical environment, focusing on the Rehe Palace area. This consistency reflects a shared aesthetic and narrative emphasis in their choice of location. Secondly, as representations of Chinese landscape painting, both maps embody the essence of Taoist philosophy, particularly the concept of blending the real and the imagined. This principle is expressed through the composition, where mountains, rivers, and architectural elements are skillfully integrated and through creating a transcendent artistic atmosphere. This approach enhances the practical utility of the maps while simultaneously imbuing them with artistic value and philosophical depth.

Chinese landscape paintings often evoke a distinct aesthetic experience in viewers. The concepts of “External Aesthetic” and “Internal Aesthetic” allow observers to engage with nature, facilitating the pursuit of optimal emotions and finding their spiritual home within the environment (Cao & Kong, 2014). At that time, most painters were deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy, focusing on the landscape and pursuing the harmony between man and nature, so the two works were similar in internal concept.

5. Discussion

While this study focuses on analyzing the visual elements of two Qing Dynasty Rehe Imperial Palace paintings, the practical application in the discussion is specifically directed at designing tourist maps for Chengde Mountain Resort. This narrowed scope is chosen for its feasibility and relevance to the research context. However, it is important to note that the findings and insights derived from this study are not limited to Chengde. They have broader implications for designing tourist maps related to other Chinese imperial gardens, offering a reference for integrating traditional aesthetics into modern cartographic practices.

Take the Panoramic Guide Map of The Mountain Resort as an example (Figure 5); it imitates ancient painting forms to create the tourist map. From this perspective, it basically takes a bird's eye view, so there is no foreshortening on the map. The architecture in the foreground is not distinct in size from the temple in the rearview. A panoramic approach can be used to represent the overall layout of the resort, offering a sense of scale and immersion. But at the same time, this perspective will also cause tourists to think that the structure of the tourist map is not compact enough and appears to lose attractions everywhere.

In the application of color, the green paints the main landscape, the reddish brown architecture, and the blue river; this map has a certain degree of color difference. However, in such a large area of green, the lack of hierarchy can not highlight the spatial structure and functional differences. In the design of a tourist map, not only the soft and natural color scheme should be considered to reflect its historical background, but also the effective planning of functions and paths to ensure the unity of aesthetics and functions.

This map uses different shades of green to represent the mountains. The use of brushwork makes this map unique. Compared with Chinese landscape painting, the lack of "cun" techniques makes the painting of the mountains less delicate and varied. Using the texture of the mountain can refine the trend and terrain characteristics of the mountain, creating a richer spatial level for the picture.

Therefore, in drawing a modern tourist map with unique Chinese cultural characteristics and imperial landscape style, it is necessary to consider the integration of Chinese landscape painting elements from the aspects of color, brushwork, perspective, and so on, and also to consider the influence of the traditional Chinese philosophy of "the harmony between man and nature" on the whole map design.



Figure 5: Panoramic Guide Map of The Mountain Resort and The Outlying Temples Scenic Area,
Source: https://mbd.baidu.com/newspage/data/dtlandingsuper?nid=dt_4717412510312823253

6. Conclusion

This research analyzed the visual elements of two Chinese landscape paintings of the Rehe Imperial Palace in the Qing dynasties, focusing on color, perspective, brushwork, and inner concepts. The findings highlight distinct artistic approaches but shared philosophical values, providing a foundation for improving the design of tourist maps of the Mountain Resort by integrating Chinese landscape elements.

This research makes several contributions to cultural heritage and modern map design. Theoretically, it bridges the gap between traditional Chinese landscape painting techniques and modern cartographic practices, offering a fresh perspective on how historical artistic principles can inform contemporary design. It offers practical insights for enhancing the design of tourist maps for Chengde Mountain Resort, illustrating how incorporating traditional visual elements like color harmony, multi-perspective composition, and texture brushwork can improve cultural representation and functional usability. These findings also provide a reference for the cartographic design of other Chinese imperial landscapes, fostering the preservation and creativity of cultural heritage in contemporary situations.

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