

To whom do Famous Gardens and Mansions Belong? The Culture of Gardens and Mansions in the Jiangnan Region during the Ming-Qing Period

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Introduction

This paper explores the cultural history of market towns in the Jiangnan region by analyzing their gardens and mansions during the Ming-Qing era. Most previous research on Jiangnan market towns has tended to focus on their social and economical characteristics, while scholarship on Ming-Qing gardens and mansions has centered on renowned urban centers such as Suzhou and Hangzhou. However, Jiangnan market towns also featured a large number of gardens and mansions, but we know relatively little about them.

This paper adopts three different perspectives in order to investigate the cultural aspects of gardens and mansions. First of all, I begin by observing the connection between garden and mansion construction and social customs since the late Ming period. Here I argue that the rise and decline of the number of gardens and mansions reflected social and economical changes in the Jiangnan region, and that the superior conditions of market towns contributed to the expanded building of gardens and mansions. Secondly, through a textual analysis of records of gardens and mansions in market town gazetteers, I try to explain the authors' motives in composing these texts, as well as the standards they used for selecting suitable materials. Finally, I explore two perspectives that records of gardens and mansions emphasize – activities in literary and artistic fields and material culture – in order to show the models by which the gentry and literati intended to construct the ideal “scholar” garden or mansion.

The Fashion of Building Gardens and Mansions

The period from the early to mid-Ming dynasty was one of economic recovery, during which the officials, gentry and wealthy elites of the Jiangnan region engaged in relatively simple and unadorned forms of consumption. Things started to change after the mid-Ming, when Jiangnan houses became more luxurious, especially in terms of their gardens and mansions. Officials and the gentry sparked this new wave of conspicuous consumption.

We can explore why the fashion of building gardens and mansions arose during the late Ming from two perspectives. First, improvements in consumption at that time marked the appearance of a “consumer society”. Another reason is some institutions that had once restricted conspicuous consumption, namely taxes and the corvée system, gradually declined in effectiveness.

The most famous gardens and mansion were concentrated in big cities. Officials and gentry who lived in these urban centers built gardens and mansions in order to display their own achievements, as well as compete to attain social and cultural primacy.

Gardens and Mansions in Market towns

The rise and decline of gardens and mansions in market towns

While many of the most renowned gardens and mansions were located in large cities, numerous others flourished in the market towns of Jiangnan region. While not as prominent as gardens and mansions in Suzhou and Hangzhou, the overall impact of gardens and mansions located in market towns should not be underestimated. This phenomenon reflects the fact that the fashion of building extravagant gardens and mansions had already spread to market towns.

Taken as a whole, we can see two peak periods of garden and mansion construction: The first is from the reign of the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522-1567) to the end of Ming dynasty, while the second covers the 18th century. Both periods neatly coincide with times of economic prosperity in the Jiangnan region.

Unfortunately, however, market town gardens and mansions suffered numerous calamities during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In particular, wars against Japanese piracy during the Jiajing reign, the warfare that marked the transition from late Ming to early Qing, and the fighting during the Taiping Rebellion, all caused great destruction to gardens and mansions. After the middle of the 19th century, some elites still strove to build or rebuild gardens and mansions, but far fewer ended up flourishing. This kind of phenomenon characterizes micro and local history, while also reflecting the impact of great political events since late Ming, thereby serving as an epitome of macro history.

Why were gardens and mansions built in market towns?

Besides economic factors, market towns had a lot of advantages that helped stimulate garden and mansion construction. Geographically speaking, market towns were located relatively close to the cities, but were not nearly as congested. Moreover, their striking scenery was highly suitable for visiting during travels. Another factor is that, beginning in the late Ming period, many landlords migrated from the countryside to market towns, while many Jiangnan gentry also moved from cities to market towns. Some clans that migrated to cities and built gardens and mansions there also would construct others in market towns. This indicates that these clans were highly active, and maintained close connections with both cities and market towns.

Representing Local Culture

Why and How was the history of the gardens and mansions recorded?

From the perspective of social history, building gardens and mansions was a negative example for traditional elites who emphasized the virtue of thrift, while also serving as a warning that wealth was variable and conspicuous consumption useless. Therefore, it seems rather curious that so many elite authors chose to record lavish

gardens and mansions in local gazetteers. What is the significance of this phenomenon? We must look for the answer in terms of cultural history.

We can attempt to determine authors' subjective motives by examining records of gardens and mansions in Ming-Qing local gazetteers. Authorial explanations for recording gardens and mansions were many and varied, including promoting the remembrance of and nostalgia for ancient times, praising the owners' filial piety, highlighting famous figures in local history, etc. However, one purpose authors had in common was to use records of these sites to represent the superiority of local culture, while also arousing local consciousness and identity, and even competing with cities in terms of cultural status.

Process of selection

In addition, the primary condition that the authors of local gazetteers used to choose which gardens and mansions were worth recording was to identify those that had been mentioned in collected poems or other works of literature. Thus, gardens and mansions selected for inclusion in local gazetteers conformed to the ideal "scholar" gardens or mansions. If owners of the gardens or mansions were not officials or gentry, their gardens would be stricken from the record or simply overlooked.

Constructing "Scholar Gardens and Mansions"

The cultural activities held in gardens and mansion included inviting scholars and literati to journey there, forming associations consisting of literati, collecting and publishing poetry about gardens and mansions, etc. The aim of these practices was not only to construct cultural status, but also contribute to the formation of actual social relationships, thereby expanding the owner's popularity and influence.

The material culture of gardens or mansions had abundant and plural symbolic meanings. Decorations were symbols of the wealth and economic power of their owners, collections symbolized their cultural taste, and exhibitions marked their status.

The former is a dynamic activity, while the latter is a static thing. These two kinds of approaches were interactive, and worked in tandem to construct a special image of "scholar gardens and mansions". Thus, the authors of local gazetteers, while representing the local cultural traditions of market towns, in fact duplicated scholar culture to a certain extent in a form of cultural reproduction that strengthened the traditional gentry's culture and status.

Scholar gardens and mansions went through several periods of destruction during the Ming-Qing era, but this form of culture was not destroyed, and many gentry continued to build or rebuild these venerable sites. Traditional gardens and mansions did not experience major changes until the waning years of the Qing dynasty, when they faced a new social environment and demands for cultural change. This is a question worthy of continuing research in the future.