

# A Comparative Analysis of the “Garden” and “Forest” Images in Tang Xianzu’s and Shakespeare’s Plays

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Received: June 22, 2021

Accepted: July 26, 2021

Online Published: July 29, 2021

doi:10.5539/ells.v11n3p49

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v11n3p49>

## Abstract

On the basis of the relevant research status at home and abroad and in-depth study of the drama texts, combining with Chinese and Western cultural traditions, social backgrounds, and the creative thoughts of playwrights, this paper compares and analyzes the similar characteristics, different artistic functions and underlying reasons of the “garden” image and the “forest” image in Tang Xianzu’s and Shakespeare’s plays.

**Keywords:** Tang Xianzu, Shakespeare, dramatic image, comparison

## 1. Introduction

When it comes to famous Western drama masters, you might immediately think of Shakespeare. If we want to find a counterpart in ancient China, it is probably Tang Xianzu. Both Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare were literary giants in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Their dramatic works have exerted a profound and ever-lasting influence on later Chinese and Western drama, literature and art. In October 2015, during his visit to the UK, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed that China and the UK jointly commemorate Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare in order to strengthen cultural exchanges between China and the UK, which has pushed the research of Tang and Shakespeare to a higher level. The year 2016 marked the 400th anniversary of the deaths of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare. Based on the honoring of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, the inheritance of culture, as well as President Xi Jinping’s proposal, the world has set off an upsurge in the study of Shakespeare’s and Tang Xianzu’s plays.

## 2. The Comparative Study of Tang Xianzu’s and Shakespeare’s Plays

Tang Xianzu is the most accomplished drama writer in Ming Dynasty, enjoying the reputation of “outstanding genius” and “eternal craftsman”. Shakespeare is a great playwright in the English Renaissance and an outstanding master of humanism literature. When Shakespeare’s plays were grandly played in British theater, Tang Xianzu’s “Linchuan Four Dreams” was also popular in Chinese drama stage. As a matter of fact, there are numerous literatures on Tang Xianzu’s and Shakespeare’s plays, but there are few parallel comparative studies on their plays.

Japanese scholar Aoki Masaru first associated Shakespeare with Tang Xianzu and found that the two died almost at the same time. In the article of the same title *Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare* published by Xu Shuofang in 1978 and 1987, the two writers’ life experiences, the background of the drama creation, the style of the drama, the stage performance, source of the creation, the language, the plot and the structure of the play were compared, involving the specific analysis of *The Peony Pavilion* and *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*.

In recent years, the comparative study of Shakespeare’s and Tang Xianzu’s plays has been increasing, and scholars are also constantly striving to achieve the comparative study of Tang Xianzu’s and Tang Xianzu’s dramas. For example, in April 2011, Shakespeare Cultural Summit Forum & Tang Xianzu and Late Ming Cultural Academic Seminar were held in Suichang. For another example, in 2014, Professor Li RuRu began to plan an international cooperation project for dialogue between Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, the Chinese and British universities jointly performed a one-night performance including Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Tang Xianzu’s *The Legend Of Nanke*.

Moreover, the joint commemoration of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare proposed by President Xi Jinping when he visited Britain in October 2015 provided policy guidance for the comparative study of Shakespeare drama.

Meanwhile, the book *Two Stars At The Same Period: Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare* written by well-known critic Li Jianjun in 2016 also comprehensively comparatively analyzes the dramatic works of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, which has become an important reference for the comparative study of Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's drama.

However, by now, there are no books concerning the study of Tang Xianzu's dramatic images in academic circles, and most of the related researches are separate papers, including the images of "dream", "garden" and "willow", "plum" and "peony pavilion" in the garden in *Peony Pavilion*, and the "purple hairpin" image in *The Legend of Purple Hairpin*. Not long after Shakespeare, many monographs on Shakespeare's dramatic images appeared in western academic circles. *The Image of Shakespeare* (1935), written by Caroline Spurgeon, an English female scholar, systematically classifies the images in Shakespeare's plays. She thinks that every play of Shakespeare has its dominant image, for instance, the dominant image in *Romeo and Juliet* is light, while the dominant image in *Hamlet* is canker and cancer. The researchers of the Imagist School of Shakespeare's drama have made a thorough study of Shakespeare's drama. Afterwards, many separate research papers are all refinement of the previous views, which are lack of innovation. However, there are few studies compare the drama images of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare, lacking holistic aesthetic consideration on the series images of Tang and Shakespeare's dramas. Therefore, on the basis of in-depth study of the two writers' drama texts, this paper makes a holistic study of the series of images in the plays of the two writers in order to obtain new breakthroughs.

### 3. The Theoretical Approach: Imagery and Image

Imagery is a literary device that refers to the use of figurative language to evoke a sensory experience or create a picture with words for a reader. By utilizing effective descriptive language and figures of speech, writers appeal to a reader's senses of sight, taste, smell, touch, and sound, as well as internal emotion and feelings. Therefore, imagery is not limited to visual representations or mental images, but also includes physical sensations and internal emotions.

"Every piece of poem should be an independent world. While understanding tacitly a good poem, the reader as well as the writer must see in the mind's eye a fresh and vivid world or a scene as in a play, by which his heart is enchanted and carried away." This "world" or "scene" is what we mean in terms of "image". An image is a mental picture seen in our mind's eye. Any figurative or descriptive language that appeals to one of the five senses is called an image. When speaking of images in poetry we generally mean a word, a phrase, a stanza, or even a whole poem that evokes a mental picture of sensory experience through imagination. Images are impressive because they make ideas concrete. When all the images in a poem are taken together as a whole, we term it as the "imagery" of the poem.

For poetic imagery, there are seven primary types. These types of imagery often feature figures of speech such as similes and metaphors to make comparisons. Overall, poetic imagery provides sensory details to create clear and vibrant descriptions. This appeals to a reader's imagination and emotions as well as their senses. Here are the main types of poetic imagery: visual (of sight), auditory (of sound), olfactory (of smell), gustatory (of taste), tactile (of physical perception through touching), organic (of internal sensation), and kinesthetic (of muscle movement).

Though imagery is often associated with poetry, it is an effective literary device in all forms of writing. Writers use imagery to create pictures in the minds of readers, often with words and phrases that are uniquely descriptive and emotionally charged to emphasize an idea. William Shakespeare's and Tang Xianzu's works feature imagery as a literary device for readers and audiences as a means to enhance their experience of the plays. Their artistic uses of language and imagery are considered to be some of the greatest in literature.

### 4. A Comparison of the Images of "Garden" and "Forest"

In drama works, natural image is usually an important category of text interpretation. Martin Iselin called drama works "the perfect image of human beings living in this world". The stories in Tang Xianzu's and Shakespeare's plays all take place in special scenes, such as the front and back gardens in *The Peony Pavilion*, the solitary locust tree in *The Legend Of Nanke*, the ancient Handan road in *The Legend Of Handan*, the wasteland in *King Lear*, the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the desert island in *The Tempest*, etc. These scenes are the important links of the introduction, the follow-up, the transition and the conclusion of the story and the bailment of the creator's subjective thoughts and emotions.

#### 4.1 The Similar Characteristics of the Images of "Garden" and "Forest"

Although the garden in Tang Xianzu's play and the forest in Shakespeare's play are different scenes, between which there are many similarities—close relation to nature, symbolizing the vitality of youth.

First, garden and forest are the important places for the occurrence and development of love stories in Tang Xianzu's and Shakespeare's dramas, in which the protagonists' consciousness of youth love awakens. The garden in the Tang Xianzu's drama first showed a beautiful scenery of the early spring—flowers were in full bloom, streams were winding forward, warblers and birds were flying and dancing, giving a vibrant feeling. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the long-repressed emotion of Du Liniang completely burst out during the garden tour. Following Chun Xiang, she entered her backyard with a sense of curiosity and was shocked by what she saw—the pavilions scattered, the rockery and stone strewn around the lake, and the flowers were clustered, and the grass was sprouting and several swings were floating with the wind. The scenery reminded Li Niang of herself that she had been fifteen years old but still had no spouse, which saddened her a lot. So the consciousness of youth love and awakening consciousness of life sprouted here. Similarly, the forest in Shakespeare's play also witnessed the love's occurrence and development of characters in the plays. The forest is full of romantic green atmosphere, representing the vitality of youth, so love is easy to sprout here. In the play *As You Like It*, The Forest of Arden is the core place. People gathered here for different purposes, but finally they all fell into the arms of love. The vitality and green romance of forest infected the young men and women in the forest, and love was born from it.

Secondly, in Tang Xianzu's and Shakespeare's dramas, garden and forest are relatively independent spaces, far away from the hub of power, is actually the garden of Eden that escapes from reality. In Chinese classical drama, the garden, the same as the hall and boudoir, is a part of the "home". But it is generally remote, rarely visited, and has pleasant scenery and quiet tracks, which is usually the great place for private associations of wits and beauties. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang lived in patriarchal society since childhood. She could only accept all kinds of demands from her father, and she never thought of resisting. However, the appearance of garden changed all of this. Du Liniang once visited the garden accidentally, watching the lake, mountains and rocks, red flowers, pavilions, warblers and birds dance in the garden, her maiden complex was awakened in the beautiful scenery of the garden, and the absolute authority of men in the ethical society was isolated from the garden, and the yearning for freedom and love was born. The same as the garden, the forest in Tang Xianzu's drama is also the place where characters escape from reality. The forest is on the edge of the city and far away from the center of power, so the power of the monarchy cannot go deep here. The whole forest forms a relatively closed free space. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia fell in love with young man Lysander, but her father disagreed with them. In the society of absolute paternity, the love of the two people was not recognized at all, so they chose to elope and enter the forest. Demetrius and Helena also entered the forest in order to pursue their love. These four people began a complex story of entanglement in the forest. The absolute authority of the father and the supreme power of the king were all isolated from the forest. Four young people were here to pursue the beloved and freely express their love.

Thirdly, the garden in Tang Xianzu's drama and the forest in Shakespeare's play are rarely-visited and thickly forested. Ghosts and spirits gather here, adding a mysterious color to the play. In ancient China, people thought the back garden was a quiet and remote place where ghosts and gods often go out, and it is not suitable for women to enjoy the scenery alone there. In *The Peony Pavilion*, after knowing that Liniang visited the back garden, Du's mother blamed her for her youth and ignorance, and attributed her long illness to her bumping into ghosts and spirits while visiting the garden. It can be seen that the garden was a mysterious and unsafe place in the people's concept at that time. Similarly, the forest in Shakespeare's play is in a remote place, with circuitous roads, dense thorns and dense fog, all of which gives the forest a layer of mysterious and terrible color. In the concept of westerners, the gods are inviolable, and the concealment of the forest provides them with a gathering place. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there were fairy king, fairy queen and elves in the forest of Athens, the former being the rulers of the forest and the latter being the executors of orders. They sang and danced here, and also quarreled in anger like humans. In the play, all the people entered the forest for their own purposes. The fairies in the forest got involved in their complicated entanglements and solved various problems with magic.

Fourthly, both gardens and forests are closely related to nature with natural scenery in them, showing the vitality of life and playing an important role in connecting plots. Scenery that often appears in the garden of Tang's Opera is "flower", "willow", "plum" and so on. In *The Peony Pavilion*, "willow" and "plum" coincide with Liu Mengmei's name. Liu Mengmei once "dreamed of a garden with a beauty standing under the plum tree". When Du Liniang met Liu in her dream for the first time, the latter was also holding a willow branch. Willow is a common image in Chinese classical poetry. "Willow" is a homonym for "stay" in Chinese. Therefore, the ancients expressed their reluctant feelings of parting with relatives and friends by folding willows. In the play, "plum" is another important image that connects Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. In Liu Mengmei's dream, Du Liniang stood under a plum tree. In real life, Du found a fruitful plum tree in her garden when she was searching

for the dream. “Plum” is a homonym for “matchmaker”. And “plum” is their matchmaker, which connects them closely. And it also implies their meeting and marriage later. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s forest, the most common image is “tree”. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, it was under a tree in the forest that the King Nava’s love and others’ were exposed. In fact, the tree image has a unique connotation in the Bible. There were all kinds of trees in the garden of Eden, including the tree of life and the tree that can distinguish good from evil. Adam and Eve were punished by God for eating the fruit from the tree of good and evil, which led to the degradation of mankind. For King Nava and others, love is the fruit of the tree of good and evil, which is hard to resist. In the end, they have to break their vows and correct their own wrong outlook on life.

#### 4.2 Different Artistic Functions of the Images of “Garden” and “Forest”

Although there are many similarities between the garden image in Tang’s plays and the forest image in Shakespeare’s plays, they represent different romantic youth scenes in China and the west. So they also have their own uniqueness.

Firstly, the changes of seasons and days in the garden of Tang opera are closely related to the emotional changes of the characters; however, the forest in Shakespeare’s plays generally only presents the landscape of midsummer and only serves as the background environment to carry the occurrence and development of the story, which is not closely related to the emotional relationship of the characters in the play. In *The Peony Pavilion*, it is under the influence of the beautiful spring scenery in the garden that Du Liniang fell in love, and her joy made the flowers, trees, rocks and water in the garden more vivid; In the late autumn, the scenery in the park was depressed, and Du Liniang died under the torture of lovesickness; In the cold winter, Liu Mengmei was infected with disease and lived in the Plum Blossom Garden, where snow covered branches and everything was white. In the early spring of the next year, everything revived. Liu Mengmei visited the garden and picked up paintings. He met and knew Du Liniang’s soul. Soon after, Li Niang was reborn and “garden” became the spiritual home of men and women. Comparatively speaking, the season of the forest in Shakespeare’s plays is much more single. It always presents the midsummer season, and the typical representative is *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. As the most representative drama work in Shakespeare’s youth, the “forest” in the work has become the source of the dramatic conflicts among Hermia, Lysander and Demetrius. However, in the end, “forest” does not become a participant in the feelings of the characters in the story, but only the place where the story takes place.

Secondly, the garden in Tang’s opera is a part of the living environment. People enjoy the scenery in the garden to vent their dissatisfaction in family life. But the garden does not relieve people’s worries and grievances, but only makes them melancholy with the scenery; But the forest in Shakespeare’s plays is closer to the original and undeveloped state, where evil is easy to produce. However, the purification function of the forest itself can eliminate the evil and solve the contradiction. In ancient China, boudoir women were generally not allowed to go out at will, so their own back garden became a good place for them to relieve their worries and spend their leisure time. In *The Peony Pavilion*, Li Niang looked for her dream in her own garden. What made her lament was the desolate and decaying scenery in the garden. She couldn’t find the dream. And the bleak scenery set off her inner loss, adding to her sorrow. Compared with the garden, the forest is closer to the original ecology. It is a part of nature, mysterious, which has not only beautiful plants, but also fierce beasts. Therefore, the forest in Shakespeare’s plays also witnesses the missing side of human nature. In *As You Like It*, Oliver was ordered into the Arden Forest to capture Orlando, Rosalind and Celia, but found himself in danger in the woods. Orlando returned good for evil and saved him from the siege of the viper and the lioness. After that, Oliver changed his mind and offered to keep the appointment for his younger brother. Outside the forest, Oliver was a villain who mutilated his brother; In the forest, however, he turned over a new leaf. Although Orlando’s behavior is also one of the reasons for his change, the purification function of the forest is also highlighted in the play. The forest dispels hatred and the desire for power, purify the hearts of men and bring them back to the bosom of love.

#### 4.3 Reason Analysis

There are so many similarities and differences in the natural scenes described by Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare in their plays, which can be attributed to the playwrights themselves and the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

First of all, the images of garden and forest in Tang and Shakespeare’s plays reflect the unique cultural traditions and connotations of China and the West. In the history of Chinese literature, the common pattern of the love drama of wits and beauties was that “they arranged to marry each other without their parents’ consent in the back garden. The poor talent became a Number One Scholar. The emperor granted them a marriage and they had a happy ending”. The garden is a scene frequently appearing in drama works, which has an internal connection

with Chinese traditional culture. From the perspective of traditional landscape art, although garden is not a natural creation, it is closely linked with nature. The highest level pursued by Chinese gardeners is that “although it is made by man, it is just like the natural scenery”, which requires craftsmen to perfectly integrate artificial landscape with natural beauty. The garden in *The Peony Pavilion* has a series of scenery: rocks, willow trees, plum trees, flowing water, peony fence, peony flowers, peony pavilion and so on, which together constitute a perfect back garden space. Man is in harmony with nature. From nature, people explore the laws of nature and understand on life. Nature also shows the power of life because of people’s attention and admiration. Therefore, the emotions of the protagonists in Tang’s plays often change with the change of seasons. In the western traditional drama, the forest also has its unique connotation. Frye points out in *Anatomy of Criticism*, “Shakespearean romantic comedy follows the comedy tradition established by bill and developed by Li Lei and Green. This tradition is related to the tradition of seasonal ritual drama of the Middle Ages. We can call it the drama of the green world because its plot is very similar to the ritual theme of life and love conquering the desert”.

Secondly, the choices of the garden image in Tang’s play and the forest image in Shakespeare’s play reflect the similar concepts in their times: advocating nature and affirming human nature. However, due to the differences in background and cultural concepts between the East and the West, there are different ways for the worship of nature and affirmation of human nature. Tang Xianzu lived in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, with the prosperity of commodity economy, the rise of the civil class, the capitalism emerged, and various new ideas appeared in people’s lives. Under the influence of Lu and Wang’s theory of mind, the value of human being was highlighted. The beautiful scenery of the garden described by Tang Xianzu’s works is an important factor that triggers the emotional growth and human nature awakening of the characters in the play. The nature and purity of the garden have inherent unity with the zeitgeist at that time. Because of this, the characters and the garden images are perfectly integrated together, and the relationship between them is harmonious and unified. Scenery touches people’s feelings, and emotional rendering makes scenery more moving. The garden image connects the whole plot of the story. Although the characters go in and out of the garden many times, they will eventually return to the garden. The garden image connects the whole plot. Shakespeare lived mainly during the Reign of Elizabeth, when the influence of the Renaissance had not fully faded, and people were still concerned about the glory of human nature. Advocating nature and affirming human nature were the universal pursuit of humanists at that time. As an important scene image in Shakespeare’s plays, the forest is the representative of reality and nature. Its ability of tolerance and purification can better show the characteristics of human nature, which coincides with the humanistic concept of the Renaissance. With contradictions and difficulties, the characters in the play enter the forest, and solve problems in the forest, and then return to the secular society. The forest contains all kinds of people, purifies the evil part of human nature, retains the good part, and restores the original and natural human nature.

## 5. Conclusion

Image has its own unique development process in Chinese traditional poetry and Western literary theory, forming rich cultural accumulation and implication. Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare used many images in their drama creation. So their comparative study can better explore the different cultural connotations and reasons for their differences, and play an important role in promoting the cultural exchange between China and the West. At the same time, the comparative study of Tang Xianzu’s and Shakespeare’s plays has certain practical reference and boosting significance for how to refine excellent Chinese cultural elements in the international context, comprehensively and truly show China’s long history and national culture to the world, promote the in-depth communication between Chinese culture and world culture, and enhance the attraction and appeal of Chinese culture in the world.

## Acknowledgments

Jiangxi Provincial Social Sciences “The 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year” (2019) Planning Project—A Comparative Study on the Images of Tang Xianzu and Shakespeare’s Dramas under the Background of Overseas Promotion of Chinese Literature (Project Number: 19WX13).

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