

# *A Comparative Study of The Palace of Versailles and Imperial Garden Yuanmingyuan*

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**Abstract:** The Palace of Versailles was constructed in the enchanting city of Paris, while the majestic Yuanmingyuan was erected in the imperial capital of Beijing. Built during the same era, they serve as splendid exemplars of Western and Eastern royal gardens and architectural marvels respectively. The purpose of this paper is to compare the Palace of Versailles and the Imperial Garden Yuanmingyuan, two historic royal palaces, and discuss the differences in their construction background, planning layout, architectural style and garden features. Because of the disparity in the personalities of the two emperors, the palace possesses its own distinctive attributes. The Palace of Versailles is famous for its magnificent architecture and French gardens, which demonstrated the power and luxury of Louis XIV; the Yuanmingyuan, on the other hand, is famous for its unique Chinese garden style and exquisite architectural complex, which reflects Emperor Kangxi's love and pursuit of traditional Chinese culture. By comparing the two palaces, we can better understand the differences in architecture and garden design across diverse cultural backgrounds, as well as their profound impact on architecture styles, landscaping techniques and cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Versailles, Yuanmingyuan, Imperial Garden, Royal palace, Cultural exchanges

## 1. Introduction

The cultural exchanges between China and France have not only spanned centuries but have also evolved and diversified over time. These exchanges encompass various aspects such as art, literature, music, cuisine, fashion, and even sports. Both countries have continuously shared their unique traditions and practices with each other, leading to a deeper understanding of their respective cultures. These exchanges have played a pivotal role in fostering mutual understanding and appreciation between the two nations. In recent years, the cultural exchanges between China and France have experienced an unprecedented flourishing, igniting profound exploration and contemplation of Eastern and Western cultures by unearthing both commonalities and disparities.

This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive comparative study on two iconic historical sites - the Palace of Versailles in France and the Yuanmingyuan (also known as the Old Summer Palace) in China, exploring their similarities and differences in terms of planning layout, architectural style and garden design. The Western design places emphasis on functionality and innovation, while the Eastern design focuses on achieving harmony with nature and integrating spiritual elements. This research seeks to provide valuable insights into understanding the distinctions between Eastern and

Western architectural and landscape design and their significance for architectural and landscape design as well as cultural development.

## **2. The Comparison between the Palace of Versailles and the Yuanmingyuan**

The Palace of Versailles was erected in Paris, France during the 17th century, while the Yuanmingyuan was constructed in Beijing, China in the early 18th century. Rooted in distinct historical and cultural contexts, these two masterpieces embody divergent architectural and landscape aesthetics from both East and West.

### **2.1. Construction Background**

The Palace of Versailles was built on the orders of King Louis XIV of France. Louis XIV was known as a conceited, assertive, and warlike king. In terms of ruling idea, he advocated absolute monarchy. In terms of hobbies, he is keen on hunting, dancing and music, and enjoys a luxurious lifestyle and art. As a veteran art collector, he supported the Renaissance movement and promoted the development of French art. At that time, France was at the height of its political, economic, and cultural power, and Louis XIV wanted to demonstrate France's power and prosperity by building magnificent palaces. The Palace of Versailles was also built to express the king's power and status, and to provide a luxurious residence for the king and his family to live in.

The Yuanmingyuan was built by Emperor Kangxi, king of China's Qing Dynasty, in the 17th century [1]. Emperor Kangxi, on the other hand, is described as a gentle, modest and thoughtful monarch who was good at listening to different voices and focused on the well-being of the people. In terms of governing principles, Emperor Kangxi devoted his attention to the stability and development of the country, and respected the opinions and suggestions of officials. He had a passion for calligraphy, painting and poetry, and a keen eye for cultural and artistic refinement. He was dedicated to preserving and advancing traditional culture, which greatly contributed to the flourishing of Chinese calligraphy, painting and literature. Emperor Kangxi built the Yuanmingyuan for multiple purposes. First of all, he aimed to show the national power and royal majesty of the Qing Dynasty in order to strengthen the diplomatic influence in foreign exchanges. Secondly, Emperor Kangxi intended to use the Yuanmingyuan as an imperial garden to commemorate his grandfather Shunzhi and his father, Crown Prince Yinreng. In addition, Emperor Kangxi also used the Yuanmingyuan as a hall of culture and art, collecting a large number of precious works of art and cultural relics to show both the cultural deposits and artistic achievements of the Qing Dynasty. Overall, Emperor Kangxi built the Yuanmingyuan to highlight the glory and culture of the Qing Dynasty, as well as his personal memory of his ancestors and pursuit of art.

### **2.2. Planning Layout**

The Palace of Versailles is located in the southwest of Paris, France, approximately 20 kilometers from the city center. It covers an area of 100 hectares, and follows a centrally symmetrical design in its planned layout. The entire palace and garden are meticulously arranged in perfect symmetry along the central axis. Along this grand central axis of the Palace of Versailles, stretches a magnificent 25km long avenue known as the Avenue de Versailles, seamlessly connecting the majestic entrance of the palace with its splendid garden attractions. The main building is comprised of a sequence of wings and a central core, which serves as the heart of the palace. Positioned at the beginning of the central axis, it stands as an eminent focal point for the entire layout. Symmetrically arranged on either side of this central core are its wings. The garden was also designed with a symmetrical layout. Extending gracefully from the central main building of the palace, an array of flower beds, majestic fountains, and captivating sculptures can be admired along the central axis. These enchanting features

are thoughtfully positioned on both sides of the central axis, creating a breathtaking picture. The secondary axis unfolds in turn along the horizontal axis, elegantly acting as a foil. This layout makes the whole palace show the characteristics of orderly primary and secondary. At the same time, the existence of three radial boulevards makes the Palace of Versailles become the centralized point of the whole Paris, highlighting its importance and dominance. This kind of composition is an illustration of absolute monarchy, because it reflects the characteristics of the king's centralization of power in one body and the overall control. The overall layout of the palace of Versailles clearly distinguished the ruling and the governed, demonstrating the importance of the palace as a symbol of power and the center of rule, and emphasizing the authority and dominance of the king [2].

Covering a vast expanse of 350 hectares, the Yuanmingyuan presents an intricate and grandiose palace complex and garden landscape that embodies the quintessence of Chinese imperial gardens. First of all, the planning and layout of the Yuanmingyuan adheres to the principle of symmetry. To form the overall layout structure, each part is connected by the primary and secondary axes. The former houses the main palace complex, while the latter shows a more open pastoral scenery, in the center of which lies the centerpiece - a picturesque lake surrounded by mountains. Second, the Yuanmingyuan emphasizes on creating a natural landscape effect and pursues coordination and integration with nature. By incorporating natural landscape elements such as mountains, lakes, rivers, carefully arranged buildings and plants, the entire garden presents a beautiful and delightful scenery. In general, the Yuanmingyuan not only shows the royal authority, but also pays attention to the harmonious integration with nature, evoking a sense of grandeur and beauty.

The Palace of Versailles and the Yuanmingyuan share similarities and differences in their layout. The principal axis and symmetry are among the commonalities. Both palaces employ a main axis that runs through the entire palace to unify the overall situation, with the aim of accentuating the emperor's authority, whereby buildings and landscapes mirror each other to create an imposing atmosphere. However, the differences are conspicuous. The Versailles layout meticulously incorporates geometric shapes, emphasizing the fusion of architecture and garden in its composition; whereas the Yuanmingyuan prioritizes natural harmony in its arrangement, ingeniously simulating natural landscapes with a little rigorous yet captivating design.

### 2.3. Architectural Style

The Palace of Versailles is one of the masterpieces of French Baroque architecture and one of the most famous palaces in Europe. Here are some of the Baroque aspects of Versailles. Firstly, Baroque architecture places greatly emphasis on symmetry, and the architectural design of Versailles exemplifies this with its strict adherence to symmetrical principles [3]. The entire structure is divided into a central main building and two symmetrical wings. The facade of the palace also showcases an unwavering commitment to symmetry, as evidenced by the identical placement of windows, columns, and sculptures on both sides. This sense of balance extends throughout the spatial layout of the palace, from the splendid decoration in each hall and chamber to every corridor and wall. Secondly, Baroque architecture pursued exaggeration and decoration, and the appearance of Versailles was richly decorated, with a large number of reliefs, sculptures and murals on its facade, even boasting a roof covered with gold leaf. One of the most luxurious elements of the Palace's exterior is the marble facade situated at the forefront. This facade consists of 17 colossal arches, each exquisitely decorated with relief and sculpture. The most famous among them are the three arches in the center, which respectively symbolizes the power, glory and triumph of the French monarchy. The decorations on these arches depicts various mythological, historical and religious tales. Thirdly, Baroque architecture emphasizes curves and motion, as evidenced by the surplus of curved lines and sinuous shapes in the architectural elements of Versailles, such as domes, arched porches, and windows [4]. Fourthly, Baroque architecture pursues grandeur and luxury, and the interior of Versailles is very luxurious,

including marble floors, gilded furnishing, ornate chandeliers and murals. The Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles is known for its large-scale decorative elements. The mirror hall boasts a color scheme dominated by gold, blue and pink orange as the main tone, which can express “gorgeous luxury beauty”. The ceiling is decorated with sumptuous frescoes, the walls are inlaid with gold reliefs and murals, and the floors are laid with fine marble. The main feature of the hall is 17 glass windows facing the garden. On the wall opposite the windows, there are 17 decorative arches. Opposite the Windows, each decorative arch is attached with 21 mirrors, a total of 357 faces, so it is called a mirror hall. At a time when mirrors were very expensive, this room was a luxury. In summary, the Palace of Versailles embodies the characteristics of Baroque architecture, including symmetry, exaggeration and decoration, curves and dynamics, grandeur and luxury [5].

The architectures of the Yuanmingyuan are interspersed in the gardens. The building is mainly wooden, which fully reflects the characteristics of Chinese Qing Dynasty architecture, complex and exquisite. Amongst the most exquisite buildings in the Yuanmingyuan, Kowloon Villa stands out as the largest and core structure within this magnificent garden. With its typical large Chinese wooden framework and yellow roof, it exudes a sense of grandeur that is truly awe-inspiring. The facade decoration is exquisitely crafted, and paintings are applied to the architecture with rich patterns and bright colors. The walls, pillars, beams and other components of the entire building are adorned with a variety of intricate patterns, including depictions of flora and fauna, landscapes, figures and more. These vibrant colors and smooth lines bring to life these painted decorations that not only enhance the artistic value of the building but also showcase the rich cultural heritage of traditional Chinese culture [6].

Moreover, the architectures in Yuanmingyuan incorporate the popular Western architectural style at that time. The French Palace, the most renowned Western-style building in Yuanmingyuan, is a quintessential Baroque masterpiece that blends European court architecture with traditional Chinese elements [6]. Its resplendent appearance and intricate facade ornamentation, including carvings, reliefs, murals and more, epitomize the pinnacle of European architectural artistry during that era. It is one of the earliest European buildings introduced in Chinese history and a witness to the cultural exchange between China and the West [7].

Through the aforementioned analysis, it is evident that the architectural styles of both palaces are truly unique. The Palace of Versailles exudes an air of luxury and power through its emphasis on symmetry and ornate decoration, while the Yuanmingyuan embodies the grace and spirit of classical Chinese garden architecture and the integration of Eastern and Western styles.

## 2.4. Features of the Garden

The garden of Versailles is a model of French garden, with its distinctive features primarily reflected in the following aspects. Firstly, the garden of Versailles exudes a remarkable sense of symmetry. The entire garden is meticulously divided into numerous geometric flower beds, lawns, and pools, presenting a precise and symmetrical sensation. Secondly, the layout design of the garden is exceptionally intricate as it incorporates an abundance of geometric shapes such as circles, ovals, squares, etc, thereby endowing the entire garden with a sense of regularity and orderliness. Thirdly, Water decoration is an important aspect of the garden, with numerous pools, fountains and artificial lakes adorning the grounds of Versailles. The fountains are diverse, contributing to an overall sense of dynamism and vitality throughout the garden. Take, for instance, the Fountain of Apollo situated at the main entrance to the palace - a grandiose fountain crafted between 1668 and 1671 by French sculptor Jean-Baptiste Tuby. In the heart of the fountain stands a colossal statue of Apollo, the god of art and the sun in ancient Greek mythology, embodying luminosity, elegance and artistic prowess. The beautiful posture and attractive visage of Apollo are portrayed in the 5.5-meter-tall copper sculpture. Surrounding the area are other magnificent sculptures, including water deities, sea gods,

goblins and dolphins, all coming together to create a breathtaking aquatic landscape. This sculpture epitomizes the luxury and complexity of Baroque art, showcasing the might and affluence of the French royal family during that era. Fourthly, the gardens of Versailles boast a large number of flowers and plants, including but not limited to roses, tulips, and lilies. The meticulously designed flower beds and areas are resplendent with vibrant hues that delight the senses. Overall, the gardens of the Palace of Versailles are renowned for their precise symmetrical layout, exquisite water features, elegant corridors, sculptures, and diverse array of flora - all testaments to the luxury and romance of French gardens [8].

The Yuanmingyuan stands as a masterpiece among ancient Chinese imperial gardens, where architecture and landscape harmoniously blend to showcase the features and aesthetic approach of Chinese gardens. The distinctiveness is initially demonstrated by its grand scale [6], which encompasses Three Mountains and Five Gardens. Renowned for its forty scenes which are inspired by traditional Chinese culture, natural landscape, Western art and other aspects, it showcases the prosperity and elegance of ancient Chinese imperial gardens [6]. The second aspect lies in its rich and diverse elements, containing a variety of distinct landscape features, such as lakes, mountains, gardens and pavilions, as well as artificial waterfalls. The most famous aquatic feature in the Yuanmingyuan is the fountain known as “Dashuifa”. Situated on the central axis, Dashuifa is a large-scale ensemble of dozens of fountains. One of the most famous is the “Fountain of the Twelve Animals”, which is themed on the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac. Functioning with remarkable precision, these fountains propel water to heights exceeding 20 meters, creating a captivating spectacle [6]. Third, the plant collocation is unique, reflecting the essence of ancient Chinese literati and focusing on the harmonious integration of nature and culture. For example, plum blossoms and pine trees are planted together to foster vitality and resilience during the cold season. The deliberate placement of lotus flowers and lotus leaves in lakes and ponds serves as a symbolic representation of purity and nobility, creating a peaceful and elegant aquatic scene. Bamboo symbolizes toughness and gracefulness, and is utilized in conjunction with stone to create a invigorating natural landscape [9].

According to the aforementioned analysis, despite being constructed during the same historical period, French gardens and Chinese gardens exhibit two distinct styles owing to the divergent cultural origins of China and the Western world. The French garden is characterized by its meticulous layout of symmetrical and geometric shapes, with a plant selection emphasizing uniformity. In contrast, the Chinese garden values natural harmony in its design and prioritizes plants that embody the principles of original ecology and humanistic sentiments. These two design styles possess their own distinctive aesthetic and expressive qualities, offering distinct visual and spiritual gratifications.

### 3. Meaning of Comparison

The Palace of Versailles and the Yuanmingyuan are exemplary works that have emerged from the diverse cultural backgrounds of East and West. Despite being situated in different temporal and spatial contexts, they can be compared to create fascinating cultural collisions. The intersection of Eastern and Western cultures holds immense significance as it fosters cross-cultural exchange and mutual learning. First of all, it can enrich the elements and styles of architecture and garden design. Eastern culture focuses on nature, balance and introversion, while Western culture values individual expression and innovation. By integrating elements from both cultures, designers can create unique and attractive architectural and garden works. Secondly, the promotion of innovation in technology and materials can be achieved. Eastern cultures traditionally favor natural materials such as wood and bamboo, while Western cultures tend to prioritize the use of materials like stone. By combining the two materials and technologies, new features will be created. In addition, it can promote the exchange of design ideas and methods. Eastern culture emphasizes wholeness and harmony, while Western culture focuses more on functionality and practicality. By blending each other's design concepts and



methods, new design philosophy would be encouraged. Finally, cultural diversity and intercultural communication can also be promoted. As the carrier of culture, architecture and garden reflect people's pursuit of beauty and life style. By integrating Eastern and Western cultures into the design, more inclusive and diverse architectural and garden spaces can be created, providing people with more choices and experiences.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Palace of Versailles and the Yuanmingyuan are both renowned palaces and gardens in the world, constructed during a similar historical epoch; however, their significance and context diverge. Famous for its magnificent buildings and exquisite gardens, the Palace of Versailles symbolized the majesty and luxury of the French monarchy, serving as a model of court architecture in Europe. The significance of Versailles lies in its ability to show the power and glory of the French monarchy, as well as the prosperity and glory of French culture [10]. The Yuanmingyuan is famous for its exquisite architecture and beautiful landscape. It integrates the design concept of Chinese garden and the elements of Western architecture, showing the unique charm of ancient Chinese royal garden. It holds great significances as it embodies the aesthetic concept and rich cultural tradition of ancient Chinese royal gardens, as well as the breadth and depth of Chinese culture.

In conclusion, the comparison between the Palace of Versailles and the Yuanmingyuan, both cultural icons, holds immense significance. It has the potential to enhance design elements and styles, foster technological and material innovation, facilitate exchange of design concepts and methods as well as promote cross-cultural communication and diversity.

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