

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Home gardening: Esthetics and beliefs interwoven in daily life

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## Abstract

Gardening, one of the significant cultural heritages of agrarian civilization, is characterized by its alignment with natural rhythms, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and a harmonious relationship with nature. It is not merely a “spatial container” that carries natural and cultural genes, sheltering both life and the soul but also an organic component of the material and immaterial forms in urban-rural contexts. Although it constitutes a microsystem, gardening far exceeds the definition of physical space, as it embodies people’s daily emotions and pursuits in nature, esthetics, art, health, and social interaction. To date, it continues to influence the “spatial production” of human habitats and social practices. This article focuses on the profound impact of gardening on human esthetic and spiritual life throughout its long historical evolution, as well as its interactive relationship with simple living. It also explores the public participation and practical pathways of gardening in contemporary urban spaces, and addresses the questions: What are the humanistic and economic values of gardening, and how will it shape our future? Starting from the cultural history of gardening, this article adopts an interdisciplinary research approach to discuss the multiple metaphors of gardening from the perspective of humanistic thought. This article concludes that although gardening is only a microsystem, it is omnipresent, with its most notable features being naturalness, physicality, relationality, and immersiveness. In the context of climate change, gardening is not only a sanctuary for survival but also a space for reshaping humanity, as well as a source of human esthetic and faith.

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## 1. Introduction

Home gardening, as an important heritage of agrarian civilization, continues to influence the production of space. Unlike public gardens or botanical gardens, home gardens occupy small domestic plots—whether in a dwelling’s front yard or backyard—that are privately owned and cultivated by individuals or families. They provide homegrown produce to meet household needs while preserving China’s time-honored farming-and-reading (耕读; *Gengdu*) tradition—a cultural practice that harmonizes agricultural labor with scholarly education across generations.

As historical experience shows, gardening serves both as a “spatial vessel” and a carrier of the natural and cultural essences within an agrarian civilization. It is a sanctuary for

both life and the soul. It serves as a microcosm of various aspects of daily life, work practices, esthetics, and leisure activities, sparking imagination and creativity in “spatial production.” Gardening nourishes a coexistence of nature, humanity, and spirituality, fostering benevolence, order, rituals, and faith. It has shaped the unique farming-and-reading philosophy of ancient China, becoming a fundamental element at the root of Chinese cultural thought and lifestyle.

Gardening nurtures virtues such as diligence, frugality, meticulous farming, self-restraint, and resource conservation. It plays an important role as a “reservoir” for food and grains, supporting the ancient Chinese Silk Road. Since Zhang Qian (195–114 BCE)’s mission to the Western Regions during the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE, when the Silk Road originated)<sup>1</sup>, the Chinese exported luxurious items, such as silk, ceramics, tea, and handicrafts, embodiments of their craftsmanship and esthetics. They were praised by people all along the Silk Road, and close bonds of friendship developed between China and countries in Asia and Europe. They were an icon of China, a land of ceremony and decorum with typical reverence for teachers. “By 1820, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) accounted for 32.9 percent of the world’s total, while Western Europe combined for 23.6 percent, and the United States (U.S.) and Japan accounted for 1.8 percent and 3 percent, respectively” (Maddison, 2001, p.263).

China’s history suggests that the peasant economy is like pieces of a puzzle. They form an entity that influences the vitality and wisdom of the socio-economic life. Meanwhile, the urban design pattern—where cities in gardens, and gardens represent cities—has nurtured generations of “educated elites who possess knowledge and intellect, but without political power or permanent property; they oppose the monopoly of political power and the subsequent monopoly of wealth” (Liang, 2005, p.180-184), bridging the cultural and blood ties between urban and rural areas.

Over a hundred years ago, Franklin Hiram King (1848–1911), then chief of the Division of Soil Management in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Soils, spent 4 months and 20 days exploring East Asia, the world’s most populous region. In China, he found out that “the

agricultural practices we are about to explore are a great creation of a vibrant nation of 500 million people. They have accumulated farming experience for 4,000 years, and this momentum will continue. These people possess a high moral character and sufficient intelligence; they are awakening and are capable of utilizing all the recent science and inventions of the Western world. These people have long and deeply loved peace, but if oppressed, they will surely, and are able to, fight for their self-defense” (King, 1911, p.2). Franklin H. King was affected by their passionate love for the land and their view of the global harmony between nature and humans, which he viewed as the culture of excellence that agrarian civilization had fostered.

Home gardening is fading rapidly as China advances with massive industrialization and urbanization, a phenomenon rooted in complex historical causes. In contemporary society, the shrinking availability of natural and rural spaces poses potential risks to both physical and mental well-being. “Nature-deficit disorder,” emotional emptiness, and the disorder of harmony between nature, humanity, and spirituality are endemic among people, with the loss of pastoral spaces being a major contributing factor. In the post-pandemic era, particularly, home gardening has gained increasing popularity among the public. From shaping national ecological strategies to promoting healthy lifestyles, as well as further ensuring food security, sustainability, and environmental friendliness, it has catalyzed the rise of community gardening movements and edible landscapes in numerous cities. This phenomenon should not be interpreted as a mere nostalgic revival of agrarian civilization, but rather represents a cultural practice that reconstructs the ethical relationship between humans and nature through the production of space.

Climate change and an uncertain future have presented a singular challenge to the production of natural, rural, and urban spaces. Our vision of what gardening is, and its economic, cultural, spiritual, and scientific values in social development, should be redefined.

## 2. Home gardening: An integral part of China’s history of humanity

Gardening is, first and foremost, inseparable from nature, life, and labor. Characterized by adherence to nature’s rhythms, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and harmony with the environment, it represents the primary economic model of an agrarian society. Gardening embodies the natural and cultural attributes that define humanity. In gardening, a sanctuary for life and spirit, we see a mixture of lifestyle, labor, esthetics, leisure, emotion, diversity, and

<sup>1</sup> The Silk Road (202 BCE–8 CE) originated during the Western Han dynasty when Emperor Wu of Han (156–87 BCE) dispatched Zhang Qian (195–114 BCE) on diplomatic missions to the Western Regions. This established a land route that began in the capital cities of Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an) and Luoyang, passed through Gansu and Xinjiang, extended into Central and Western Asia, and eventually connected with various Mediterranean countries.

imagination. It has evolved over the course of history from being a means to prevent starvation. People weave their visions—a longing for the natural world—into gardening, which gives rise to culture and civilization as nourishment for the life of the mind.

In ancient China, a courtyard often came complete with a garden. In Chinese pictographic characters, the word “庭 (Ting)” originally referred to the main room of a house and the space in front of a hall, that is, a courtyard. “院 (Yuan)” refers to the space enclosed by walls or fences around a house and its surroundings. For example, in “藜棘树于中庭 (Lijishu Yu Zhongting)” (from *Songs of Chu: Nine Laments, Thinking of the Past* [楚辞:九叹·思古; *Chuci: Jiutan-Sigu*] by Liu Xiang [77–6 BCE] [77–6 BCE]), “庭 (Ting)” refers to “庭院 (Tingyuan).” The terms “庭 (Ting)” and “院 (Yuan)” first appeared together in the *History of the Southern Dynasties* (南史; *Nanshi*) by Li Dashi (570–628) and Li Yanshou (620–680 AD), where it is recorded, “特爱松风 (Te Ai Songfeng), 庭院皆植 (Tingyuan Jie Zhi), 每闻其响 (Mei Wen Qi Xiang), 欣然为乐 (Xinran Wei Le).” The primary uses of a courtyard include planting vegetables, fruits, and grains, or raising poultry. During the Wei (220–266) and Western Jin (266–316) dynasties, gardens featured pavilions and terraces, along with places for lyre-playing, chess, calligraphy, and painting. They became expressions of emotional attachment and favorite leisure spots for intellectuals.

In the minds of common people, a garden is a place for self-reliance, where resources are thoughtfully optimized to meet daily needs. It helps support the socio-economic system. While precise economic statistics from this field are unavailable, insights from external sources indicate that a small-scale farming economy not only sustained vast national expenditures through tax contributions but also maintained a sustainable relationship with the land (soil) through meticulous cultivation and efficient resource recycling. Since the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), Chinese ancestors, leveraging their distinct esthetics and masterful craftsmanship, introduced luxury goods, such as silk, ceramics, tea, and artisanal crafts, to the global stage. Labor is intertwined with nature, as the latter supplies the materials for the former. Through labor, these materials are transformed into the essential sustenance required for survival—the fundamental condition of human existence (Marx, 1891/2006). This “natural gene” represents the primary condition of life, encompassing not only biological significance but also elements that extend beyond the purely biological realm.

The cultural and historical roots of gardening stretch far back. For example, the saying during the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE) from *Book of Poetry: Lessons*

*from the States, Odes of Wei* (诗经·魏风·十亩之间; *Shijing·Weifeng·Shimu Zhijian*)<sup>2</sup>:

十亩之间兮 (Shimu zhijian xi), 桑者闲闲兮 (sangzhe xianxian xi), 行与子还兮 (xing yu zi huan xi)  
十亩之外兮 (Shimu zhiwai xi), 桑者泄泄兮 (sangzhe xiexie xi), 行与子逝兮 (xing yu zi shi xi)

Another example is an excerpt from the poem “South of the River (江南; *Jiangnan*)” by Han Yuefu:

江南可采莲 (Jiangnan ke cailian), 莲叶何田田 (lianye he tiantian)  
鱼戏莲叶间 (Yu xi lianye jian)

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), there is the poem “Passing by a Friend’s Village (过故人庄; *Guo Gurenzhuang*)” by Meng Haoran (689–740):

故人具鸡黍 (Guren ju jishu), 邀我至田家 (yao wo zhi tianjia)  
开轩面场圃 (Kaixuan mian changpu), 把酒话桑麻 (bajiu hua sangma)

Gardening not only weaves beauty into the fabric of daily life but also elevates ordinary existence into a continuous esthetic experience. Indeed, heaven and humanity are not separate—they merge into a single, harmonious whole. Since the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE), the layout of imperial and capital cities adhered to established principles: the court at the front, the market at the rear, the ancestral temple at the left, and the altar of land and grain at the right. This design also incorporates the concept of the “imperial city and the outer city with its various neighborhoods” (He, 1996), reflecting traditional principles that place people at the center and emphasize the harmony between humanity and nature. It is evident that traditional spatial design fostered diversity and cultivated a sense of tranquility and simplicity in humanity, embodied in the “smoky atmosphere” of gardening.

The most exemplary figure of gardening in Chinese history is undoubtedly Tao Yuanming (365–427) from the Wei–Jin period<sup>3</sup>. In his poem *Returning to Live in the South*:

<sup>2</sup> The *Book of Poetry* is the foundational anthology of Chinese verse, compiling 311 poetic works dating from the early Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) to the mid-Spring and Autumn period (770–481 BCE). As the earliest extant poetry collection in Chinese civilization, it mirrors the social landscape across 5 centuries of Zhou dynasty governance (11–6 centuries BCE). The authorship of most poems remains unverifiable due to their origins in oral traditions and collective editing.

<sup>3</sup> His famous works include *Record of the Peach Blossom Spring* (桃花源记; *Taohuayuanji*) and *Returning Home* (归园田居; *Gui Yuantian Ju*).



*First Poem* (归园田居·其一; *Gui Yuantian Ju·Qiyi*), he wrote:

羁鸟恋旧林 (*Jiniaolianjiulin*), 池鱼思故渊 (*chiyusi guyuan*)  
开荒南野际 (*Kaihuangnanyejì*), 守拙归园田 (*shouzhuguoyuantian*)  
方宅十余亩 (*Fangzhai shiyumu*), 草屋八九间 (*caowubajiuqian*)  
榆柳荫后檐 (*Yuliu yin houyan*), 桃李罗堂前 (*taoli luotangqian*)

By embracing simplicity, cultivating a tranquil and refined mindset, and maintaining an unadorned character, Tao Yuanming embodied the free spirit of “采菊东篱下 (*Caiju Donglixia*), 悠然见南山 (*Youran Jian Nanshan*)” as indicated in his poem “Wine Drinking: Fifth poem (饮酒·其五; *Yinjiu·Qiwu*).” This approach laid the groundwork for a naturalistic, pastoral, and poetic tradition that would deeply influence generations to come (Li, 2007).

Tao Yuanming is not an isolated figure; many others throughout China’s long cultural history have shared a similar spirit. In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the scholar Yuan Mei (1716–1797)<sup>4</sup>, after resigning from his official post, withdrew to the mountains and countryside, where he lived for several decades in seclusion. He transformed a desolate wilderness, once a place where “the garden was in ruin, the birds and beasts had abandoned it, the hundred flowers had withered, and the spring breeze could not revive the blooms,” into the flourishing Garden of Sui, where “cranes are freed to seek the mountain birds, and visitors can enjoy the blossoms of all four seasons.” Indeed, as Yuan Mei himself remarked, “I exchanged an official post for this garden, and now the wonders of the garden are plain to see” (Gu, 1982).

In addition, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (清明上河图; *Qingmingshanghetu*) presents a multitude of vivid scenes, brimming with the bustling energy of daily life, offering a striking depiction of the prosperity of traditional society, economy, and culture (Figure 1). The cultural and historical glimpses captured by the brush are not only masterpieces of art drawn from life, but also the living essence of gardening culture, flowing through time. They continue to serve as a profound source for cultivating humanity, intellect, and spirituality; their vitality and significance still shine brightly in the world of gardening today.

<sup>4</sup> Yuan Mei (1716–1797) was a poet and critic of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) (Gu, 1982). His works include *Suiyuan Collection* (随园集 [*Suiyuanji*]) and *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment: Yuan Mei’s Manual of Gastronomy* (随园食单 [*Suiyuan Shidan*]).



**Figure 1.** A partial section of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (清明上河图, *Qingmingshanghetu*), one of the 10 greatest classical paintings in China, painted by the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) artist Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145), is the only surviving work authenticated to his hand. Rendered in ink and color on silk, it measures 24.8 cm in height and 528.7 cm in length, depicting the urban topography of 12<sup>th</sup>-century Bianjing (modern-day Kaifeng, Henan)—the Northern Song capital. It illustrates an integrated urban–rural scene in which the city and its surrounding rural landscapes coexist in mutual embrace. Source: Reproduction of the painting by Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145) (<https://www.duitang.com/blog/?id=1072393433>, last accessed on June 25, 2025).

The Song dynasty (960–1279) scholar Zhu Xi (1130–1200)<sup>5</sup> expressed this enduring essence in his poem “On Viewing Books: First Poem:”

半亩方塘一鉴开 (*Banmu fangtang yijian kai*),  
天光云影共徘徊 (*tianguangyunying gong paihuai*)  
问渠那得清如许 (*Wen qu nade qingruxu*)? 为  
有源头活水来 (*Wei you yuantou huoshui lai*)

This is one of the most philosophically profound articulations of traditional gardening thought, capturing the harmony of nature, the physical form, and spiritual transcendence. Su Shi (1037–1101)<sup>6</sup>’s line, “可使食无肉 (*Keshi Shi Wu Rou*), 不可居无竹 (*Buke Ju Wu Zhu*)” (from “Yu Qian Monk’s Bamboo Pavillion” [於潜僧绿筠轩; *Yuqianseng Luyunxuan*]), embodies a pursuit of lofty principles and a disdain for material desires and worldly allure. It embodies the spiritual essence of gardening, revealing the distinctive allure of traditional leisure culture. As the French sinologist Jacques Gernet aptly observed, “In all of these civilizations, there is a comprehensive inclusion of literature and art,

<sup>5</sup> Zhu Xi (1130–1200) was a leading neo-Confucian philosopher of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) (Zhang, 2019). His core doctrine is “reserving heavenly principle and eliminating human desires” (存天理·灭人欲; *Cuntianli Mierenyu*), and his major works include *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books* (四书章句集注; *Sishuzhangjuzhuzhu*) and *Reflections on Things at Hand* (近思录; *Jinsilu*).

<sup>6</sup> Su Shi (1037–1101), also known as *Dongpo Jushi* (东坡居士; literally “Resident of Eastern Slope”), was a renowned literatus.

cosmology, philosophical pursuits, and humanistic values.” (Gernet, 1962, p.151)

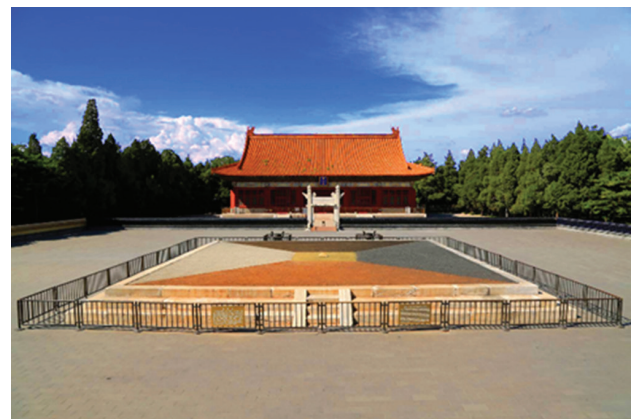
Home gardening is profoundly shaped by the philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The Confucian maxim, “饭疏食 (*Fan shu shi*), 饮水 (*yinshui*), 曲肱而枕之 (*qugong er zhen zhi*), 乐亦在其中矣 (*le yizaiqizhong yi*)” (“The Analects: Shu’er” [论语·述而; *Lunyu-Shu’er*])<sup>7</sup>, embodies the ideal of a life rooted in simplicity and quiet joy. The Buddhist practice of vegetarianism underscores the importance of self-restraint and the harmony between personal development and the natural world’s rhythms and growth. Meanwhile, Daoism encourages a harmonious alignment with the flow of nature, embracing the optimal timing and setting for every action. By weaving metaphysical principles into the practical fabric of life, home gardening cultivates an oasis of beauty and spirituality in Chinese living.

### 3. A space where nature, humanity, and spirituality coexist

Gardening in China dates back to the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), when urban planning followed the imperial capital model of “court in the front, market in the back; and the ancestral temple stood to the left, the altar of land and grain to the right” (He, 2014, p.7), pioneering a harmonious integration between capital cities and nature. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties, Beijing, as the capital, successively established the Temple of Heaven, Earth Altar, Sun Altar, Moon Altar, and Xiannong Altar. During major solar terms, the emperor would lead officials in rituals to worship heaven and earth. To this day, the Altar of Land and Grain with its “five-colored soil” remains preserved in Beijing’s Zhongshan Park (Figure 2), symbolizing prayers for favorable weather and abundant harvests.

Therefore, from the beginning, gardens in the Chinese minds have never been merely physical spaces; they are also realms where nature, humanity, and spirituality coexist.

Home gardening not only ensures diversity in the form of production and lifestyle but also establishes the cultural system of “unity of nature and humanity (天人合一; *Tianrenheyi*)” (Zhou, 2002). It gives rise to a multifaceted economic landscape and social microstructure, where spiritual and natural spaces are equally cherished, material and immaterial heritage coexist harmoniously, and urban and rural life are seamlessly intertwined. This system encompasses sophisticated natural ethics and



**Figure 2.** The five-colored soil refers to five types of naturally occurring soils in distinct colors: blue, red, yellow, white, and black. As an iconic symbol of traditional Chinese culture, the five-colored soil has carried profound auspicious meanings for thousands of years. In ancient China, the “Altar of Land and Grain (社稷祭祀, *Shejijisi*)” ritual system was an important ceremonial practice for worshipping the earth. Under the Confucian concept of “honoring heaven as father and earth as mother” (父天母地, *Futianmudi*), emperors throughout Chinese history placed great emphasis on constructing and conducting sacrifices at these altars. The five-colored soil altars embodied traditional Chinese reverence for the land. The most well-preserved Altar of Land and Grain is in Beijing’s Zhongshan Park, boasting a history of over 600 years.

Source: Photo from the Beijing Municipal Administration Center of Parks ([https://gygl.beijing.gov.cn/mlgy/mlgy\\_gyjg01/202102/W020210209571462738840.jpg](https://gygl.beijing.gov.cn/mlgy/mlgy_gyjg01/202102/W020210209571462738840.jpg), last accessed on June 25, 2025).

agricultural techniques, alongside a spiritual sanctuary of “farming-and-reading family tradition (耕读传家; *Gengduchuanjia*).”<sup>8</sup> It integrates rituals and principles drawn from the Daoist ideal of natural harmony, as well as the intrinsic forces that nurture both humanity and the divine. It reflects both self-cultivation and self-discipline, alongside divine forces, such as the “interaction of nature and man” and the concept of the “wrath of Heaven.” It has not only preserved the value of agrarian civilization but has also become a philosophical source of life esthetics.

In the era of agrarian civilization, gardening served as both a vital mode of production and a fundamental way of life. It nurtures the rich diversity of nature and culture while also safeguarding the enduring survival of civilization. This cultural system is rooted in the belief in the harmonious

<sup>7</sup> The “Shu Er” chapter of *The Analects* (论语·述而; *Lunyu-Shu’er*) advocates “finding contentment in poverty while delighting in the way.”

<sup>8</sup> The farming-and-reading family tradition (耕读传家; *Gengduchuanjia*) is one of the traditional Chinese philosophies of domestic governance (治家之道; *Zhijiazhidao*) that advocates a dual emphasis on farming labor and scholarly pursuit. It cultivates both industrious resilience and moral self-cultivation, epitomized in the enduring family maxim: “Integrity sustains families; literature perpetuates lineages.” These principles remain inscribed on ancestral gateways, testifying to China’s living cultural heritage.

coexistence of nature, humanity, and spirituality, with the five Confucian virtues—benevolence, justice, courtesy, wisdom, and sincerity—serving as guiding principles for both production and daily conduct.

Humanity (天性; *Tianxing*) refers to the intrinsic qualities inherent in an individual, yet profoundly intertwined with the natural world, embodying the broader ethical principles that govern the Chinese worldview. Humanity is nurtured within the fabric of the natural world, encompassing the environment, natural laws, and other species. This signifies that human nature is an inseparable part of the cosmic order, highlighting that humanity both originates from and is deeply dependent on nature. As early as the legendary era of Emperor Shennong<sup>9</sup>, there existed an ecological protection decree:

神农之禁 (Shennong zhi jin), 春夏之所生 (chunxia zhi suo sheng), 不伤不害 (bushang buhai), 谨修地利以成万物 (jinxiu dili yicheng wanwu), 无夺民之所利 (Wu duo min xhisuoli), 则民顺其时矣 (ze min shunqishi yi) (From *Six Strategies: The Tiger Plan* [六韬 • 虎韬; Liutao: Hutao])

Later, Emperor Yu (Xia dynasty [2100–1600 BCE])<sup>10</sup> issued the Yu Prohibition (禹禁, *Yujin*)<sup>11</sup>, which records:

春三月 (Chun sanyue), 山林不登斧 (shanlin budeng fu), 以成草木之长 (yicheng caomu zhi zhang)  
夏三月 (Xia sanyue), 川泽不入网罟 (chuanze buru wanggu), 以成鱼鳖之长 (yicheng yubie zhi zhang)  
且以并农力 (Qieyi bing nongli), 执成男女之功 (zhicheng nannü zhi gong), ... (From *Yizhoushu-Dajujie* [逸周书 • 大聚解])

These profound wisdoms laid the foundation for the earliest Chinese conception of nature. In this way, the origins of Chinese philosophical thought can be traced to the principles of “imitating nature” and “the unity of nature and humanity.”

Humanity, at its core, is the belief that “I am born with nature, and all things are one with me” (from *Zhuangzi: The Adjustment of Controversies* [庄子 • 齐物论; Zhuangzi-Qiwulun]), the foundation of human beauty (Zhuangzi, n.d.).

Humanity is deeply intertwined with nature, shaping one’s character and fostering virtuous emotions, psychology, and principles of behavior. Guan Zi (723–645 BCE) is credited with founding the concept of “placing humans at the core” (from *Guanzi: Discourse on Hegemonic Strategies* [管子 • 霸言; Guanzi-Bayan])<sup>12</sup>. Mencius (372–289 BCE) further proposed that humans are born with four “beginnings of goodness”<sup>13</sup>—compassion, a sense of right and wrong, deference, and a sense of justice—which, through social interaction and conduct, develop into the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The sages understood the complexity and variability of humanity, leading Cheng-Zhu neo-Confucianism (程朱理学; Chengzhulixue) to propose “preserve heavenly principle and suppress human desire.” The “heavenly principle” refers to the fundamental principles of natural law and the laws of the cosmos, while “suppressing human desire” advocates for self-discipline and self-control, urging individuals to regularly examine themselves and restrain the unchecked expansion of personal desires. The distinction between “heavenly principle” and “human desire” is captured in the saying, “eating and drinking is the heavenly principle; seeking delicacies is human desire” (from *Thematic Discourses of Master Zhu*, Volume 13 [朱子语类 • 卷十三; Zhuziyulei-Juanshisan]). In other words, natural needs align with the “heavenly principle,” while insatiable cravings represent “human desire.” The “heavenly principle” embodies impartiality, great goodness, and benevolence, whereas “human desire” reflects narrow self-interest, small vices, and selfishness. Thus, “preserve heavenly principle and suppress human desire” pertains to the cultivation of one’s nature and mind. The material standards of living set by the Chinese ancestors were practical and simple: Two acres of land, a cow, a wife, and children gathered around a warm kang

<sup>9</sup> Emperor Shennong (神农), the leader of the Jiang clan during the ancient period (Neolithic era [7000–1700 BCE]), was known as Shennongshi (神农氏). He is considered the inventor of agriculture and medicine, and is famous for the saying “Shennong tasted a hundred herbs (神农尝百草; Shennong Chang Baicao).”

<sup>10</sup> Emperor Yu, historically known as Dayu (大禹) or Emperor Yu, was the leader of the Xiahou clan and the founding monarch of the Xia dynasty (2100–1600 BCE). His most notable achievement, celebrated throughout the ages, was his successful management and control of the devastating floods, a feat that has been passed down through generations.

<sup>11</sup> The series of policies and decrees issued by Emperor Yu to govern the world.

<sup>12</sup> Although traditionally attributed to the statesman Guan Zhong (c. 720–645 BCE), modern scholarship widely agrees that the *Guanzi* is a composite text. It was compiled over several centuries, likely between the late Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the Western Han dynasty, and contains a diverse collection of writings from various philosophical schools. Therefore, it is best understood as a work attributed to Guan Zhong’s name rather than authored by him personally.

<sup>13</sup> The *Meng Zi* (孟子; Mengzi), based on the philosophy of Mencius (372–289 BCE), is a classic work of ancient Chinese philosophy that was originally published during the Warring States period.



(炕; *kang*), and modest wealth brings contentment. These frugality and simplicity serve as boundaries to curb the unchecked expansion of human desires and are also the essence of beauty.

Spirituality is an intrinsic part of both nature and humanity; it represents the transcendence of consciousness, symbolizing humanity's boundless potential and the possibility of cultivating one's virtues. Far from being abstract or fantastical, spirituality is deeply rooted in the concrete realities of life, such as production, daily living, clothing, food, shelter, and leisure. In agrarian civilizations, people adhered to the belief that "Gods are three feet above the head (举头三尺有神灵; *Jutou Sanchi You Shenling*)",<sup>14</sup> suggesting that humans should approach nature, social order, other people, and all living things with reverence. One should never act recklessly. Terms such as "heaven," "heavenly lord," "mountain god," "kitchen god," and "tree spirit" reflect a simple and tangible understanding of spirituality. This reflects the ancient view of "nature" and underscores the role of rituals honoring "Heaven and Earth" in fostering self-discipline and moral restraint, aligning with the theological concepts introduced by Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), such as "the interaction between nature and man" and "the wrath of Heaven" (Ban, 1962). Although these ideas may seem to belong to the realms of religion or theology, they highlight the central role of moral ethics in shaping both the cosmos and humanity. Reverence for nature, therefore, becomes the foundation for harmony between "human and nature," "human and human," and "human and community," as well as the unity of "self, body, and mind." It is the ultimate expression of human beauty.

The spirituality of Chinese people can be described as:

The religious spirit of the Chinese... not merely material nature but always pointing to the life force of the cosmos. It is intimately intertwined with human emotions, such as esthetic appreciation for nature and affection for natural things, without the contempt or desire to conquer nature that would set the human spirit in opposition to the natural world. This represents one path toward cultivating a peaceful spirit in humanity. (Tang, 1988, p.516)

Home gardening not only forges an inseparable bond between humanity and nature but also becomes internalized as a vehicle of spiritual belief, sustaining life's

meaning through the interaction of nature, humanity, and spirituality. Within this triad:

People perceive the world of life as a coexistence of three types of "existents" —humans, spirituality, and objects. Each of these existences holds the potential to transform into "others" or "it." For example, humans can become saints, spirituality can manifest within objects, and humans can transform into objects. Through their interactions, these existents coexist in the world of life. (Wu, 2023, p.68)

Here unfolds a profound interpenetration: plants embody spiritual vitality, cultivation becomes an act of humility, and spiritual presence bestows protective blessing. This synergy gradually evolves into three internalized principles: nature's authenticity, humans' subjectivity, and spiritual transcendence (Figure 3).

#### 4. Home gardening: The multiple metaphors of life

The phrase "poetry and the distant horizon" metaphorically captures the modern yearning for natural space, embodying



**Figure 3.** One of the illustrations of *The Poems on Tilling and Weaving* (耕织图; *Gengzhitu*), originally painted by the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) artist Lou Shu (1060–1162) during the Shaoxing reign period (1131–1162). It depicts an idealized portrayal of China's traditional small-scale farming economy. Celebrated by successive emperors as an agricultural masterpiece, this seminal work is recognized as "the world's first illustrated manual of agricultural science." *The Poems on Tilling and Weaving* comprises a total of 45 paintings, including 21 farming scenes and 24 weaving scenes, and is currently housed in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

Source: Reproduction of the painting by Lou Shu (<http://information.moketdao.com/upload/new20181210171319.html>).

<sup>14</sup> "Gods are three feet above the head" conveys the folk belief that divine beings observe human actions and mete out punishment for misdeeds, thus promoting moral self-discipline.

a sense of weariness in the urban concrete jungle. As industrialization and urbanization advance, people find themselves reaping material prosperity and wealth. Yet, at the same time, they experience a growing spiritual discontent, stemming from an increasing disconnection from the natural world. Once regarded mainly as a challenge in children's development, "nature-deficit disorder" (Louv, 2005) has now become a far-reaching issue, influencing individuals across all age groups. Its effects are reflected in behavior, emotional well-being, psychological balance, and cognitive functioning. According to recent data, the depression rates among Chinese students show a concerning trend: 13.5 percent in primary school students, 12.3 percent in middle school students, and 10.8 percent in high school students (Fu *et al.*, 2023). Among young adults aged 18–24, the figures increased significantly, with a depression rate of 24.1 percent. Of these, 17.2 percent experienced mild depression and 7.4 percent suffered from severe depression, indicating this age group is particularly vulnerable compared to others. In the 25–34 age group, the depression rate stands at 12.3 percent. This issue is further compounded by the diminishing availability of rural spaces due to urbanization and suburbanization, a trend that has become a mounting public concern.

The absence of natural spaces can lead to a distorted perception of the world. For example:

Some individuals mistakenly believe that the grains and food they consume daily are purely technological products, completely dissociated from the Earth. They show little interest in understanding the origins of the food that sustains their lives. This detachment from nature undermines a fundamental, dual-layered understanding—both subjective and objective—of its essential role in human life (Ma, 2022).

Modern society, in many respects, has abandoned a once-rich and interconnected historical experience: the tradition of nature, humanity, and spirituality coexisting in harmony. Consequently, conditions such as "nature-deficit disorder," "spiritual desertification," and the "imbalance between nature, humanity, and spirituality" have emerged. These conditions affect not only the human body and mind but also the cognitive framework through which we perceive and interact with the world. Only by fostering a profound emotional connection between humanity and nature, as well as with biodiversity, can we ensure the sustainable and healthy development of our species. Allowing trees the space to grow naturally and freely can subtly yet powerfully shape a person's spiritual character. In contrast, the imposition of "iron fences" can never foster positive change in humans. It is akin to "treating prisoners

or beasts," and it has a detrimental effect on an individual's spiritual well-being, nervous system, and mental health (Sun & Ma, 2023, p.60).

From a historical perspective, gardening, as a microcosmic circulatory system, not only serves as a guiding force for fostering economic activities and sustaining the ecological environment on which we rely but also carries the unique mission of bridging the material realm with the spiritual one. Nowadays, gardening serves three essential functions: first, it highlights the fundamental truth that humans are intrinsically connected to nature; second, it offers a remedy for the "urban ailments" of contemporary society; and third, it provides historical and cultural examples of the harmonious "union of city and countryside" (Howard, 1902). Looking to the future, gardening not only supports the circular economy and sustainable development but also acts as a safeguard against the unpredictable forces of nature.

As climate change becomes an accepted reality and the pandemic continues, there is a growing desire among people to reconnect with rural life. Environmental education for the younger generation has become increasingly urgent, while older city dwellers have developed a strong attachment to leasing small plots of land. Urbanites and office workers are transforming balconies and neglected corners of land into miniature gardens. Gardening is infusing creativity and inspiration into the workspaces of citizens, communities, artists, and urban planners alike. A yearning to reconnect with nature is inspiring a host of encounters, intersections, and opportunities. The quest for "poetry and distant horizon" is evolving from a mere aspiration into an intentional endeavor.

## 5. A vital channel for contemporary life and cultural transformation

The idea of carving out a natural space for planting amid concrete jungles is a dream many people cherish today. Even with limited gardening space, these green havens bring immense value by intertwining esthetic creativity with rich layers of meaning. They can evoke historical memories, inspire social initiatives, foster community bonds, and offer a sense of emotional rootedness. As a result, diverse urban landscapes have emerged—ranging from pocket parks and community farms to parent-child eco-parks, fruit and vegetable picking gardens, and farmers' markets—offering new opportunities for people to reconnect with nature and rural traditions. In addition, the growing demand for leisure activities has inspired people to immerse themselves in nature through pursuits such as farming, fishing, visiting pastures, camping, and exploring fields and farms. This shift has broadened both



the definition and the potential of modern gardening spaces.

In recent years, pocket parks have emerged in many cities across China. While modest in size, these spaces are thoughtfully designed to meet community needs, providing easily accessible and practical recreational areas. Urban management initiatives often focus on reclaiming underutilized spaces, transforming abandoned alleys or neglected corners into green, and ecological gardens or small-scale planting areas. This approach aims to ensure that residents have access to greenery within 300 m and a park within 500 m of their homes. Notably, reports indicate that almost 30,000 pocket parks have been built across the country (Figure 4).

Urban residents without access to courtyards often find creative solutions, such as using planting boxes to grow fruits and vegetables. Those living on the ground or top floors make the most of available space, cultivating flowers, vegetables, green walls, and vine-covered walkways. These small, inventive gardens greatly enhance the urban environment. A questionnaire survey on Chinese households' food self-provisioning (a term synonymous with home gardening), conducted by Chinese and European scholars, reveals that among 2,050 respondents, 67 percent of urban dwellers practiced home gardening, while 90 percent of rural dwellers had homegrown plants (Jehlička *et al.*, 2024). However, this form of agricultural

practice often remains invisible due to its ubiquitous yet modest presence. Three primary factors account for this phenomenon: first, the fast-paced lifestyle of city dwellers leaves little time for such observations; second, constant smartphone use has dulled people's sensitivity to natural beauty; third, the rigid itineraries of time-pressured travelers tend to overlook these micro-landscapes. It is noteworthy that home gardens in Beijing's *hutongs* (胡同) demonstrate exceptional visibility, a phenomenon attributable to the capital's historical urban design, where "rigorously ordered artificial structures interweave with natural elements in mutual enhancement" (Wu, 2014, p.359), as well as the traditional residential architecture of the *siheyuan* (四合院; courtyard residences) (Figure 5).

## 6. City farm

City farm typically springs up on the outskirts of urban centers, where individuals rent plots in suburban or rural areas to cultivate vegetables and fruits of their choice. This form of gardening is particularly popular in areas surrounding cities. While some participants are driven by a desire for organic green food, others use their weekends to reconnect with nature, tilling the soil not only as a source of nourishment but also to stay active and enhance their well-being. As they engage with the land, they witness and contemplate the natural cycle of life—how it begins from nothing, grows from small to great, flourishes into abundance, and eventually fades and decays. These moments of reflection reveal the profound miracle of existence, inspiring a deeper appreciation for life. City farms offer a unique opportunity to heal the mind and soothe the soul. In our survey and observation,



**Figure 4.** The entrance area of Huaibaishu Back Street, Changchun Street, Beijing. Pocket parks serve multiple functions—playgrounds for children, rest spots for seniors, and exercise spaces—reflecting an improved approach to urban space design.  
Source: Photo by Huidi Ma (2025).



**Figure 5.** A well-preserved Ming–Qing-era *siheyuan* (四合院) in Beijing is now available for sale, as shown in this aerial view. The Beijing *siheyuan* embodies the ancient Chinese ideal of harmony between humanity and nature. Its practical design ensures livability while achieving profound aesthetic depth, a physical realm where heaven, earth, and humans coexist. Source: Photo from the Kuaizixun website ([https://www.360kuai.com/pc/9daf396b1dc103ae2?cota=3&kuai\\_so=1&sign=360\\_e39369d11](https://www.360kuai.com/pc/9daf396b1dc103ae2?cota=3&kuai_so=1&sign=360_e39369d11)).

in megacities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, due to severe land scarcity, city farms can only be developed in limited numbers on the outskirts of the cities, whereas in small and medium-sized cities, the number is higher (Figure 6).

## 7. Balcony gardening

Balcony gardening creates a unique green space that blends seamlessly with the living environment, offering a refreshing escape within a concrete jungle. According to our research, most balcony gardeners are office workers who cultivate these spaces for two primary reasons: to calm their minds and alleviate stress and to combat the physical toll of prolonged sitting. Gardening promotes physical fitness and overall well-being. More significantly, it offers a reprieve from constant screen time, directing attention to the rhythms of “spring planting, summer tending, autumn harvest, and winter storage.” In doing so, it helps people connect with the beauty of nature and provides a calming counterbalance to the pressures of modern life. The small balcony evolves into a compact plant garden, flower garden, vegetable patch, or eco-friendly leisure retreat. In recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, a young generation of urban farmers has emerged, significantly boosting the home cultivation industry. This trend has not only expanded the market for agricultural supplies (including seeds, fertilizers, planting containers, and tools) but also spurred new business models, such as live-streaming tutorials and technical guidance platforms. Together, these developments have formed a comprehensive industry chain with an annual output value surpassing 10 billion Chinese yuan. Among Chinese cities, Shanghai, Dongguan, Beijing, Suzhou, and

Guangzhou ranked as the top five for balcony gardening, with millennials (born 1985–1995) representing the primary demographic of urban cultivators (Huang, 2022) (Figure 7).

## 8. Farmers’ market

Farmers’ markets offer something supermarkets cannot: the earthy aroma of soil and the fresh vitality of nature. Every day, they bring together a wide variety of fresh produce—fruits, eggs, poultry, fish, and meats—forming a connection between people and the natural world. Beyond shopping, these markets become spaces to exchange cooking tips, gain a deeper appreciation for the hard work of local farmers, and discover how the unique qualities of the land help sustain the community. The atmosphere is filled with the vibrant sounds of diverse dialects and local accents, each voice carrying the warmth of family ties and a love for life’s simple pleasures. The colorful abundance of fresh food offers a feast for the senses and provides for every meal of the day. In this bustling environment, the ordinary becomes extraordinary—full of detail, variety, and vitality. Amid the rapid pace of modern life, farmers’ markets preserve a sense of constancy, where the timeless joy of food, curiosity, comfort, and a deep sense of belonging remain steadfast. This vibrant environment weaves a bond between people and nature, unites the human and the spiritual, and captures the enduring essence of life’s spirit.

In July 2014, Angela Dorothea Merkel, then Chancellor of Germany, visited the Shenxianshu Farmers’ Market in Chengdu, where she purchased Pixian broad bean paste, sampled chili powder, handpicked ingredients for Sichuan dishes, and chatted with stall owners about the variety and



**Figure 6.** City farm in Hong Kong. (A) Urban farming plots (5 sqm) are available for HKD 200 per quarter at a residential community on Lantau Island, Hong Kong, managed by DB Green. It is worth noting that Lantau Island remains largely undeveloped as an ecological preserve. It designates dedicated farmland for locals to cultivate, promoting mental and physical well-being, offering nature education for youth, and creating meaningful spaces for leisure. (B) A community-organized poster for planting culture exchange activities.

Source: (A) Photo by Huidi Ma (2024); (B) Brochure by The Community Cultural Monthly Newsletter.





**Figure 7.** Home gardening serves both practical and aesthetic purposes—it nourishes the body, delights the senses, and enriches our community culture. “I usually grow chili peppers and cucumbers, and share them with neighbors and passersby,” the lady in the photo remarked. Source: Photo by Huidi Ma (2024; taken at Shanguo hutong, Xicheng district, Beijing).

freshness of their produce (Wang & Liu, 2014) (Figure 8). Farmers’ markets serve as an important window into a city’s ecological landscape—a living, miniature ecological museum. They are places where everyone shares the unique Chinese philosophy of nature with love and humility.

Pocket parks, farmers’ markets, balcony gardens, urban farms, and charming courtyards—these diverse forms of spatial production—are all integral to green living. Regardless of individual motivations, those who cultivate these spaces share a unified aspiration: to seamlessly integrate nature into daily life, creating environments where humanity, the natural world, and spirituality coexist in harmony. Notably, these practices serve as subtle yet powerful mediums of cultural transformation, shaping new lifestyles and reimagining the idea of a spiritual home. In contemporary society, home gardening continues to evolve, taking on increasingly diverse and innovative forms.

## 9. Discussion

Under China’s Rural Revitalization Strategy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs released its 2023 policy to “develop home gardening and create new avenues for increasing farmers’ income” (Nongcanhao, 2023). This initiative undoubtedly marks a new path toward complementary urban-rural symbiosis, revealing the potential for a modern transformation of China’s agrarian



**Figure 8.** Chancellor Merkel selecting Pixian broad bean paste, a specialty condiment from Sichuan, at a Chengdu farmers’ market on July 6, 2014. Source: Photo from China News Network (<https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnfby0>).<sup>15</sup>

civilization. It also invites renewed reflection on the extraordinary achievements rooted in China’s traditional smallholder farming practices.

By 1820, China accounted for a substantial 32.9 percent of global GDP, dwarfing the combined GDP of Western Europe at 23.6 percent. In contrast, the U.S. and Japan contributed only 1.8 percent and 3 percent, respectively. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Western missionaries and merchants played a key role in introducing Chinese culture to Europe, igniting widespread fascination among the European elite. Exquisitely crafted goods, such as silk, tea, and porcelain, captured the imagination of the upper classes (Wang, 1984). These refined arts were all deeply rooted in China’s enduring traditions of home gardening and artisanal craftsmanship, as well as the far-reaching influence of the philosophy “human follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature” on Chinese esthetics of living.

In 1817, the French scholar Stanislas Julien published a French translation of the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经; *Daodejing*), and in 1823, Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat authored a biography of Laozi (571–470 BCE). In addition, German philosophers, such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, also took an interest in Daoist thought and studied the *Tao Te Ching*. Western scholars have praised Laozi as “a true philosopher, a perceptive ethicist, an eloquent theologian,

<sup>15</sup> Pixian broad bean paste (郫县豆瓣酱; Pixian Doubanjiang) is a geographically protected specialty from the Pixian district (formerly Pixian county) in Chengdu, Sichuan province. This premium Chinese condiment is well-known for its artisanal production. Distinct in material selection and fermentation techniques, it achieves a rich umami flavor without any additives, showcasing a glossy color and balanced taste. It is honored as “the soul of Sichuan cuisine.”



and a metaphysician” (Wang, 1984). This chapter of cross-cultural exchange also documents the multiple values created by the small-scale farming economy and its impact on the Western world.

Over a century ago, Franklin H. King visited several farming families in Shandong province, where one family of 12 told him, “on 2.5 acres of land growing wheat, millet, sweet potatoes, and beans, they raised one donkey, one cow—typical local draft animals—and two pigs.” Based on this, Franklin H. King extrapolated that, “such population density equates to 3,072 people, 256 donkeys, 256 cows, and 512 pigs per square mile” (King, 1911, p.7). In his eyes, this exemplified the outstanding experience of agrarian civilization and a model of sustainable agriculture.

Forty-five years ago, Luancheng County in Hebei province conducted a study titled “Research on village greening and development and exploitation in high-yield agricultural plain.” A survey of 30 households revealed that, by utilizing slack farming season and secondary family labor (the elderly, weak, sick, or disabled), these 30 households achieved a per-*mu* (亩; Chinese unit of area measurement, 15 *mu* = 1 hectare) output value of 7,139 Chinese yuan based on land area utilized. Compared to high-yield farmland earning 300 Chinese yuan per *mu*, the former was nearly 24 times higher. Even when calculated based on the total courtyard area, the per-*mu* output reached 1,774.5 Chinese yuan—6 times that of high-yield farmland. If measured by total residential plot area, the per-*mu* output was 1,441 Chinese yuan, still 4.8 times that of high-yield farmland (Yu, 1984).

Yu Guangyuan (1915–2013), then vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as an economist, conducted a special study and pointed out that “the development of courtyard economy fits China’s national conditions” (Yu, 1985). China has a mere 1.5 *mu* (0.1 hectares) of arable land per capita—less than one-third of the global average. Under such resource constraints, the courtyard economy not only holds micro-level value but also generates significant macro-level benefits (Yu, 1985). With keen foresight, Yu Guangyuan urged society to recognize the immense potential of these small plots of land. However, this visionary proposal was ultimately marginalized under the rapid tide of industrialization and urbanization.

Yu Guangyuan’s vision inevitably clashed with the accelerated pace of urbanization. From 1978 to 2018, it was recorded that:

The total number of cities in China increased by 468, a 2.4-fold growth, averaging 16.44 million new permanent urban residents per year—roughly 31 people per minute

migrating to cities. The urbanization rate of the rural resident population rose from 17.92 percent in 1978 to 58.52 percent in 2017. (Wang, 2024) In just 40 years, China has completed the transformation from “rural China” to “urban China.” (Dan, 2022).

While this shift has substantially improved living standards for millions, hidden social problems, such as massive loss of arable land, widening gap between urban and rural areas, rural hollowing-out, farmers relocated to urban housing, the disintegration of small-scale farming, and the decline of traditional agricultural skills and techniques, have gradually surfaced and become widespread. As reported:

From the developmental trajectory of developed countries, village decline during urbanization and industrialization is a gradual, natural process. Yet, the abrupt eradication of villages in times of peace seen in some parts of China is unprecedented, whether in our history, or in other countries. Forcing such rapid village dissolution without adequate conditions inevitably triggers numerous social problems. (Chen, 2011).

What warrants deeper reflection is the deviation in China’s agricultural development path amid this urban transition. Some scholars have strongly criticized the uncritical emulation of the U.S.’s model of “large-scale and intensive production,” denouncing it as an act of reckless ignorance. They argue that such policy missteps have caused severe ecological and environmental damage, as well as potential food safety risks. At the same time, the loss of the rational function of a small-scale farming economy has not only accelerated the depletion of rural populations and resources but also intensified urban labor market pressures, ultimately straining the limits of society’s crisis resilience (King, 1911/2011). The compounding of these challenges underscores the urgent need to re-evaluate the value of the courtyard economy and explore new paths for achieving the balanced development of urban and rural areas.

According to census data, over the past decade, the population of county towns and county-level cities has increased by more than 30 percent, with buildings in county cities becoming primary destinations for rural residents undergoing localized urbanization. Meanwhile, traditional home gardening in rural areas has been rapidly declining. While China’s Rural Revitalization strategy does promote the revival of gardening in a certain sense, the challenges to this revival remain significant.

Years of urban encroachment on rural land have led to deep-rooted risks and ripple effects. On an individual level, a widespread detachment from agriculture has emerged among middle-aged adults and the younger generation,

marked by indifference, abandonment, or even aversion to farming. Most able-bodied middle-aged adults and younger people have left their hometowns, yet for many, cities remain “neither fully accessible nor escapable” (Liu, 2024).

On a societal level, excessive intervention in the natural environment through urban design, coupled with the “over-packaging” of nature, not only compromises ecological conservation but also creates uninspired, formulaic “scenic areas.” Furthermore, much of today’s artificial design emphasizes external “form” while lacking internal “soul.” Projects driven by the pursuit of rapid returns and heavy investment often struggle to endure over time. Recently, reports have surfaced of formerly popular agritourism farms, eco-parks, rural inns, and guesthouses falling into decline. While the causes vary, a common thread emerges: design homogeneity and a persistent imbalance among nature, humanity, and spirit.

From policy and public administration perspectives, beyond issues such as policy inconsistency, management gaps, inadequate capacity, redundant construction, short-lived projects, and corruption, more practical challenges persist:

- (i) Lack of scientific planning: Many projects proceed without thorough feasibility studies, hastily following trends;
- (ii) Growth-at-all-costs mentality: Preoccupation with short-term GDP growth or vanity-driven projects often overrides sustainable development considerations. Insufficient risk assessments regarding market saturation, ecological carrying capacity, and crisis preparedness further exacerbate these issues;
- (iii) Top-down public participation: Grassroots engagement is frequently shaped by administrative mandates, undermining the spontaneity, diversity, and autonomy of civic involvement; and
- (iv) Institutional support voids: The lack of social support systems leads to contentious land-use disputes in urban areas (e.g., undeveloped lots and unmanaged parcels) and arbitrary usage restrictions (Sun & Ma, 2023).

Nevertheless, with the implementation of national ecological and food security strategies, these challenges are expected to be gradually resolved. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has reignited public enthusiasm for home gardening, attracting broader participation in this social practice through diverse forms. Historical experience demonstrates that home gardening, though a micro-level system, embodies two core values. First, it promotes sustainable human development through its inherent qualities, such as resilience, inclusiveness, affinity, and regenerative capacity. Its economic potential should not be underestimated. Second, it constructs a habitat for

the inner world of the human being through naturalness, physicality, relationality, and immersive experience, integrating physical vitality with spiritual essence.

Home gardening serves as a vital mediator in modern life and cultural transformation, capable of transitioning between different modes and generating fresh spaces. It interweaves the spiritual with the material, the personal with the communal, the modern with the historical, and the intimate with the expansive. Through a process of parallel development, gardening embodies a pattern of discovery—finding new or overlooked spaces—advances to production—shaping social spaces and their organizational dynamics—and culminates in creation—through landscapes, monumental structures, or ornamental urban forms. Each of these spatial mechanisms arises from the interplay of diverse forms of human wisdom and the simultaneous assembly of various material elements (Lefebvre, 2021).

In the face of climate change and an increasingly uncertain future, the simple act of sowing seeds in a garden becomes a quiet gesture of resilience—one that cultivates the confidence needed to confront the unknown. This act compels us to contemplate profound questions: How can we perpetuate the 10,000-year legacy of agricultural wisdom rooted in harmony between humans and nature? In what ways can home gardening help restore the esthetics and faith embedded in daily life? And how can urban-rural integration be transformed into participatory public practice? The answers to these questions will determine whether we can reconstruct humanistic dimensions in urban spatial production and accomplish spiritual redemption from modernity.

## 10. Conclusion

This study is situated within the context of Chinese humanistic traditions, integrating esthetic philosophy with micro-scale spatial practices. It establishes a tripartite dialogue among theory, history, and contemporary reality. Employing the framework of spatial production theory, the study proposes a triadic analytical approach encompassing material space, spiritual space, and social space in home gardening practices, thereby illuminating the value of small-scale farming in history. The research also re-evaluates the significance of traditional farming economies and modernity in the era of climate change and uncertainty, offering novel perspectives for integrated urban-rural development. A notable limitation of this study lies in the proposed concept of “home gardening as humanistic restoration,” which requires further validation through empirical evidence from real-world surveys and longitudinal analysis.

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## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Consent for publication

The author confirms that informed consent for the publication of the images and data was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

## Availability of data

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the present study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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