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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Therapeutic landscapes and healing gardens: A review of Chinese literature in relation to the studies in western countries



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Abstract

The paper deciphers the Chinese literature to English speaking scholars and bridges the gap between China and the western countries on the topics of therapeutic landscapes and healing gardens. Three parts of contents are included in the paper. Firstly, four schools of theories explaining how and why nature can heal, are introduced based on the studies in western countries with the examination of terminology used. In the second part, 71 publications in Chinese are systematically reviewed, with 19 significant studies analyzed in details, including focus areas, the research method, and major findings. In the final part, Chinese studies are evaluated in relation to the theories in western countries.

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1. Introduction

There have been accumulated research interests on the therapeutic effects of nature since 1970s in western countries. Research evidences have explained how and why natural views and landscape sceneries ease people's pressure and change their mood from various perspectives, including medical geography (Gesler, 2003), environmental

psychology (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1992; Ulrich, 1984, 1999), ecological psychology (Vries, 2010; Moore and Cosco, 2010), and horticultural therapy (Detweiler, et al., 2012; Söderback et al., 2004). The once disappeared courtyards in hospitals revives in the early 1990s accompanied by the increasing research interest of therapeutic landscapes/healing gardens in the United States. Researches on this topic in western countries have a great impact on China.

Aiming to decipher the Chinese literature to English speaking scholars and bridge the gap between China and the western countries on the topics of therapeutic landscapes and healing gardens, three parts of contents are included in the paper. Firstly, four schools of theories explaining how and why nature can heal are introduced based on the studies from western countries, with the

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examination of terminology used. In the second part, 71 publications in Chinese are systematically reviewed, with 19 significant studies analyzed in details, including focus areas, the research method, and major findings. In the final part, Chinese studies are evaluated in relation to the theories and studies in western countries.

2. Theories and terminology of therapeutic landscapes and healing gardens in the western countries

There has been a long tradition to view nature as “healer” in different cultures. Garden for the ill first appears in Europe during the Middle ages, with monastic hospitals providing enclosed vegetation gardens with an earnest wish for the spiritual transformation of patients (Gerlach-Spriggs et al., 1998). The therapeutic effects of nature to improve patients’ recovery has been, for the first time, precisely written and published by Florence Nightingale in *Notes on Nursing* in 1860. She believes that visual connections to nature, such as natural scenes through window and bedside flowers, aid the recovery of patients (Nightingale, 1863).

Since the 1970s there have been continuous empirical studies in western countries indicating that natural environments have therapeutic effects. For instance, Olds (1985) examines the therapeutic effects of nature by interviewing focus groups in a coherent workshop for several years, and concludes that places with natural features can heal people’s emotional depression. Francis and Cooper Marcus

(1991) conducted similar interviews and found out that people went to natural environment for “self-help” under stressed or depressed conditions. As a result, several schools with different bodies of knowledge emerged, establishing a relationship between landscape and health to explore the healing mechanisms of nature (Table 1). In the following text, the author discusses four major schools based on the studies in western societies, including: medical geography, environmental psychological, “salutogenic environment” and the ecological approach, and horticultural therapy.

2.1. Medical geography

In view of explaining the healing effects of nature, a significant amount of research come from cultural geography leading to the development of the medical geography school. The concept of “therapeutic landscape” is first introduced by medical geographers, to define places with natural or historic features for the maintenance of health and well being (Velarde et al., 2007). The term “therapeutic landscape” has traditionally been used to describe landscapes with “enduring reputation for achieving physical, mental and spiritual healing” (Gesler, 2003; Velarde et al., 2007). This term has also been linked to sense of place, leading to four dimensions of therapeutic landscape including: natural environment, built environment, symbolic environment and social environment (Gesler, 2003). Branched from environmental psychology, two streams of theories have explained the therapeutic effects of nature with discussions as followed.

Table 1 Therapeutic landscapes and healing gardens: four schools of theories in western studies.

School	Terminology	Theories	Representatives
1 Medical geography	Therapeutic landscape	Sense of place; four dimensions of therapeutic landscapes: natural environment, built environment, symbolic environment and social environment	Gesler (2003)
2 Environmental psychology	Restorative environment Therapeutic landscapes and healing garden	Attention-Restoration Theory (ART); four features as restorative environment: being away, extent, fascination, and action and compatibility Esthetic-Affective Theory (AAT); psycho-evolution theories; three features of healing gardens: relief from physical symptoms, illness or trauma; stress reduction for individuals dealing with emotionally and/or physically stressful experiences; and an improvement in the overall sense of well-being	Kaplan and Kaplan (1989); Kaplan (1992); Kaplan and Berman (2010) Cooper-Marcus and Barnes (1999); Cooper-Marcus and Sachs (2013); Ulrich (1984, 1999); Ulrich, et al. (1991); Ulrich and Parsons (1992).
3 Ecological psychology	Salutogenic environment and therapeutic landscape	Theories of environmental affordances; ecological psychology	Heft (1999, 2010); Grahn et al. (2010); Grahn and Stigsdotter (2003).
4 Horticultural Therapy	Healing garden and therapeutic garden	Theory of “flow experience”; sensory stimulation theories	Söderback et al. (2004); Detweiler, et al. (2012).

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