

Original Paper

“Ren” and Spatial Design in Ancient Chinese Architecture: A Discussion from the Perspective of Confucian Aesthetic Concepts

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Abstract

This paper adopts the unique perspective of Confucian aesthetic principles to investigate their profound impact on the interrelationship between “Ren” (benevolence) and spatial design in classical Chinese architecture. Drawing upon core Confucian concepts such as “Ren”, “Tian Ren He Yi” (the unity of man and nature), and “Jin Shan Jin Mei” (the pursuit of perfection), the study meticulously analyzes specific instances of classical architectural layouts and spatial designs, providing a detailed exposition of the manifestation of “Ren”. Subsequently, it elucidates how Confucian aesthetic principles influence classical architecture by inheriting and developing the spirit of benevolence and adeptly applying an aesthetic consciousness of the unity of space and time. Simultaneously, the paper distinctly presents the profound insights of Confucian aesthetic principles on contemporary spatial design and societal development. This influence extends beyond the formal and structural aspects of architecture, permeating deeply into the cultural connotations embedded in architecture. It injects distinctive and valuable design wisdom into contemporary society, contributing not only to the comprehension of the cultural value of ancient architecture but also furnishing a novel framework for contemporary spatial design. In doing so, it offers concrete and far-reaching guidance for the construction of a harmonious society.

Keywords

classical Chinese architecture, Confucian aesthetic concepts, spatial design, cultural studies

1. Overview of Confucian Concepts of Aesthetics

Confucianism has been the dominant ideological framework in China for over two millennia, exerting a profound influence on Chinese aesthetics (Yang, 2018).

1.1 Concept of “Ren”

Confucian aesthetic theory places a strong emphasis on balancing a person’s emotional and spiritual demands with social and ethical obligations, especially when it comes to the idea of “Ren.” Confucius held that “Ren” is the ultimate moral norm for the satisfaction of both individual and communal lives, and that true beauty is found in the mutual love of people.

“Ren” is the central idea of Confucianism, signifying a wide range of moral principles. It is a useful idea with a strong foundation in reality rather than just a rigorous ethical theory or philosophical abstraction. It places a strong emphasis on each person’s subjectivity, self-improvement, and interpersonal peace and love. This is the core of Confucian aesthetics, which has a distinct view of beauty.

1.2 Concept of “Tian Ren He Yi”

A fundamental principle in Confucian philosophy, “Tian Ren He Yi” (the unification of heaven and humanity) represents the natural harmony that exists between people and society as well as between people and nature. It seeks to assist people in achieving harmony and balance—inside themselves, outside of themselves, and within society.

The unity of heaven and humanity, as taught by Confucianism, highlights the mutual dependency and symbiotic link between people and the natural world. It promotes the idea that to live in harmony and unity with the natural world, people’s actions and lifestyle choices should be in line with the laws of nature. Chinese environmental aesthetics holds that the “virtue of heaven and earth” is embodied in the interaction between “humans” and the natural environment, which is essential to the well-being of all living things in the cosmos (Wei & Li, 2017).

Furthermore, the idea encourages individuals to treat others with benevolence, playing a constructive role in society. Through respect for others and caring for society, an individual can contribute to a harmonious coexistence with society. The concept also promotes harmony between an individual’s inner self and the external world. It emphasizes the pursuit of inner peace and tranquility, enabling individuals to maintain stability and composure in the face of external challenges and pressures.

Ultimately, Confucianism’s concept of the unity of heaven and humanity highlights the crucial importance of moral cultivation and character. Through continuous moral refinement and the enhancement of inner qualities, individuals achieve the harmonious unity of the mind and society. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of inner qualities, encouraging individuals to achieve harmony between the mind and society through self-cultivation, thereby realizing the unity of individuals with nature and society.

1.3 Concept of “Jin Shan Jin Mei”

The Confucian concept of “Jin Shan Jin Mei” embodies the pursuit of perfection and an ideal state, guiding individuals to achieve harmony and prosperity through the continual pursuit of moral perfection and spiritual elevation.

The concept underscores the individual’s responsibility to continually strive for moral and spiritual

excellence. It emphasizes the active pursuit and creation of beautiful things in life, guiding individuals to seek excellence and spiritual elevation. Simultaneously, Confucianism encourages individuals to treat others with a compassionate heart, promoting social harmony and prosperity through virtuous actions. The emphasis on benevolence, respect for social order, and adherence to moral principles contribute to the stability and continuous progress of society.

In the field of spatial design, various techniques such as repetition, interconnection, juxtaposition of reality and illusion, overlap, representation, and phantasmagoria contribute to the formal beauty of a space. Designers, through these techniques, can create a unique and harmonious combination of elements, achieving the effect of “Jin Shan Jin Mei” (Duan, 2012).

In summary, the Confucian concept of “Jin Shan Jin Mei” reflects a collective pursuit of moral perfection, social harmony, and individual spiritual elevation. It emphasizes that individuals should strive continuously to achieve the perfection of their lives and the harmonious unity of society. This concept underscores Confucian culture’s emphasis on individual character and social morality, reflecting Confucianism’s aspiration for societal harmony and happiness. Its application allows viewers to engage in free contemplation and experience, enabling spatial design to reach the realm of “beauty and goodness.”

2. “Ren” and Spatial Design in Ancient Architecture

2.1 Case Study One: Suzhou Garden-Liuyuan

Suzhou Liuyuan (Figure 1) is a representative classical Chinese garden, and its design and layout fully embody the Confucian concept of “Ren”.

Harmony between Architecture and Nature: Various scenic spots within Liuyuan are cleverly laid out and designed according to the topography, creating a harmonious coexistence of nature and culture for visitors. For instance, the “Xiao Peng Lai” area in Liuyuan features trees, flowers, and stone corridors as primary landscape elements. Through meticulous arrangement and configuration of plants, a mysterious and tranquil space is crafted, immersing visitors in an environment reminiscent of the fairyland of Peng Lai. One courtyard within Suzhou Liuyuan, with independent yet interconnected courtyards, significantly highlights the temporal and spatial composition of internal architectural scenes, showcasing the enduring viewing characteristics within the buildings.

Expression of Humanistic Spirit: The lattice window patterns in Suzhou Liuyuan each possess distinctive features (Figure 2), yet within their variations, they reveal a unified overall aesthetic. The diverse forms of windows often serve as the “frames” for scenic views, with a specific room’s window panels forming a circular “frame,” turning the external scenery into picturesque scenes that change with each step, providing endless enjoyment (Chen & Qian, 2023). These aspects embody the Confucian concept of “Ren”, reflecting care and respect for people.

Respect for Nature: Some of the stones present in the garden are crafted from Taihu Lake rocks. These stones, influenced by the flow of water in Taihu Lake, have become various stubborn rocks. The reason

for their extensive use in Suzhou gardens lies in the complementary qualities between the stones and the gardens. Taihu Lake rocks exhibit transparency and elegance, fitting seamlessly into the refined and delicate atmosphere of Suzhou Gardens.

These aspects all reflect the close relationship between “Ren” and spatial design in Suzhou Liuyuan. In the design process, considerations extend beyond functionality and aesthetics to encompass the harmonious unity of individuals with nature, society, and their inner selves—adhering to the Confucian concept of “Tian Ren He Yi”.



Figure 1. Suzhou Garden – Liuyuan



Figure 2. The Leaky Window in the Liuyuan Garden

2.2 Case Study Two: The Forbidden City, Beijing

The Forbidden City, located in the heart of Beijing, China, served as the imperial palace during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It stands as the world's largest and most well-preserved ancient wooden architectural complex. The layout and design of the Forbidden City's architecture fully embody the Confucian concept of "Ren".

Firstly, the architectural hierarchy of the Forbidden City reflects Confucian notions of social hierarchy. The buildings in the Forbidden City, including the Hall of Supreme Harmony (Figure 3), exhibit strict class distinctions in terms of height, scale, and ornamentation. The Hall of Supreme Harmony, used by emperors for significant ceremonies, exemplifies unparalleled scale and arrangement, symbolizing the supreme authority of the emperor.

Secondly, the overall layout of the Forbidden City adheres to a strict symmetry principle, embodying Confucian emphasis on order and harmony. In Confucian thought, order and harmony are regarded as the foundations of social stability and prosperity, a concept fully realized in the architectural design of the Forbidden City. For instance, the buildings are arranged along the central axis, forming a rigidly symmetrical structure.

Lastly, the interior decorations of the Forbidden City serve as a concentrated embodiment of the "Ren" philosophy. In Confucianism, the realization of "Ren" is seen as the greatest happiness achievable in life. Within the architectural embellishments of the Forbidden City, numerous motifs featuring flora and fauna (Figure 4) not only beautify the structures but also carry auspicious and harmonious meanings, reflecting the philosophy of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.



Figure 3. The Hall of Supreme Harmony, the Forbidden City

In conclusion, as a treasury of ancient Chinese architecture, the Forbidden City profoundly reflects the Confucian concept of "Ren" in its design and layout. This philosophy constitutes the core of traditional Chinese culture and has exerted a profound influence on ancient Chinese architecture. The architectural design of the Forbidden City not only showcases imperial authority but also emphasizes the concept of "Tian Ren He Yi", the unity of heaven and humanity. Its design principles continue to provide significant inspiration to this day.



Figure 4. Painting of the Forbidden City Palace

2.3 Case Study Three: West Lake, Hangzhou

West Lake in Hangzhou (Figure 5) is one of China's most renowned scenic spots, and its design and layout fully embody the Confucian concept of "Ren".

The natural and cultural landscapes of West Lake harmoniously blend, reflecting both the Confucian philosophy of "Ren" and the concept of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. The mountains surrounding West Lake exhibit gentle slopes, and its waters are rarely disturbed by strong winds or waves, typically presenting serene and sunny conditions or gentle breezes with light rain. The spatial arrangement of West Lake is moderate, providing viewers with a balanced and not overly immersive experience, avoiding extremes of vividness or emptiness. The scale of the West Lake scenery is appropriate, allowing for comfortable and panoramic views without the need for excessive tilting or angling, providing a visually pleasing and relaxed experience (Zhejiang-style Gardens, 2019). These qualities resonate with the Confucian doctrine of moderation and balance, reflecting a life attitude and philosophical approach to existence that aligns with the Confucian principles.

The combination of elements, such as the gentle curves of the mountains, the moderate expanse of the waters, the delicate islets, and the petite bridges and towers, all contribute to the infinite charm of West Lake. The pavilions, towers, and ancient temples both inside and outside the lake, along with the traditional boats, add to the endless fascination of West Lake (Zhejiang-style Gardens, 2019). The diverse components of West Lake's landscape are rich in form but exhibit a gentle and rhythmic style, characterized by a Yin softness, and this aesthetic quality derives from an appreciation and reverence for the intrinsic nature of West Lake (Zhejiang-style Gardens, 2019).



Figure 5. West Lake, Hangzhou

In summary, West Lake’s architectural design and layout fully embody the Confucian concept of “Ren.” The spatial design of West Lake not only reflects the harmony between humans and nature but also the harmony among individuals. This design philosophy continues to provide important insights for us today.

3. Confucian Aesthetic Concepts and Their Impact on Classical Architecture

3.1 Continuity and Development of the Spirit of Benevolence

The Confucian aesthetic ideology of “Ren” emphasizes the integration of individual emotional and psychological needs with social and ethical norms. This aesthetic philosophy is inherited and developed in classical architecture, manifesting primarily in two aspects: the beauty of warmth and the beauty of vitality.

Warmth Beauty: The beauty of warmth in classical architecture is expressed through clever layouts, intricate structures, and delicate decorative elements. Especially in spatial design, an emphasis on the rational arrangement of courtyards creates an atmosphere of warmth and pleasantness. The layout of courtyards and the design of passages convey, in detail, a warm consideration for human nature, transforming architecture into an expression of emotion and culture rather than a mere structure.

Vitality Beauty: The Confucian virtue of “Ren” focuses on individual self-improvement and the harmony of social ethics, which translates into the beauty of vitality in classical architecture. Architectural design incorporates carefully integrated natural elements such as plants and water features, creating vibrant spaces. The clever combination of rockeries and plants in courtyards, along with the introduction of ponds and flowing water, infuses the entire space with the breath of life. Such designs not only reflect the harmonious coexistence of architecture and nature but also evoke a sense of

vitality and beauty, where every leaf and droplet seems to convey the rhythmic essence of life, making the architecture an integral part of living rather than an isolated structure.

Together, the beauty of warmth and vitality constitute the continuity and development of the spirit of benevolence in classical architecture. This transforms architecture into a comprehensive embodiment of emotions, social relationships, and the beauty of nature, creating spaces that resonate not only with material presence but also with inner feelings, fostering a harmonious and warm atmosphere in society.

3.2 Aesthetic Consciousness of Unified Time and Space

The aesthetic consciousness of unified time and space is the epitome of Confucianism's concept of the unity of heaven and humanity. It finds multifaceted expressions in classical architecture, particularly in the aesthetic expression of interior spaces in traditional Chinese architecture, where the unique and ingenious use of "dividers" stands out.

Interior spaces with partition walls, such as the partitioned doors in Suzhou Garden-Liuyuan, exhibit a semi-permeable effect, delineating physical space while maintaining a sense of openness. Similarly, floor-to-ceiling circular skylights, through delicately perforated floral dividers, ingeniously create a virtual division within the interior, enriching spatial layers and enhancing interior decor.

Emphasizing harmony and flow in space, the rotation and retrospection of sightlines, and aesthetic attention to temporality, classical architecture under the influence of Confucian culture presents a harmonious unity of individuals with nature, society with individuals, and time with space. This aesthetic concept underscores ways for individuals to perceive infinite interest in limited spaces, highlighting the symbiotic prosperity of individuals in nature and society (Zhang, Wang, & Wang, 2021).

As noted by Mr. Zong Baihua, the Chinese conceptualization of the universe is intertwined with dwelling houses, forming the universe through dwellings and the movements within. Under this spatial concept, time and space are inseparable, portraying a life that is calm yet orderly (Zong, 2005). This concept permeates ancient Chinese philosophical thinking, integrating the rhythms of time with spatial orientation and forming a uniquely Chinese cosmological view.

In conclusion, the designs of unified time and space, the application of "dividers," and the interpretation of the universe concept allow classical architecture to become a work of art with unique aesthetic value and cultural connotations.

4. Confucian Aesthetic Concepts and Their Insights into Contemporary Spatial Design and Social Development

Confucian aesthetic concepts, emphasizing a human-centric approach and societal harmony, offer significant insights for both contemporary spatial design and social development. In the context of severe homogenization in modern industrial design and the rationality-driven challenges to traditional humanistic thinking, Confucian aesthetic concepts provide a unique perspective and beneficial guidance to address the loss of humanistic sentiments in the backdrop of industrialization (Yang & Ye,

2023).

4.1 Social Development

In terms of social development, Confucian aesthetics underscores individual goodness and social responsibility. This inspires us to incorporate the Confucian concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” in designing cities, buildings, or communities, aiming for harmonious and unified spaces. Architectural design should prioritize fostering interaction and cooperation among community members, creating warm and intimate environments to promote social harmony and prosperity.

One of the core principles of Confucian aesthetics is “Ren”, emphasizing care for others, interpersonal relationships, and the pursuit of social harmony. Considering emotional needs, social responsibility, and shared spaces, modern designs can create more humane environments, fostering a more harmonious and warm social atmosphere.

4.2 Sustainable Development and Ecological Harmony

Looking at environmental sustainability and ecological harmony, Confucianism’s concept of the unity of heaven and humanity emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. This encourages designers to consider how to integrate natural elements, use sustainable building materials and technologies, and create ecologically friendly spaces aligned with Confucian principles. Through such designs, we can better protect the environment, promote the symbiotic coexistence of humans and nature, and achieve sustainable development goals.

4.3 Social Responsibility and Shared Spaces

Confucian aesthetics’ emphasis on social responsibility and shared spaces also provides valuable insights for contemporary spatial design. It highlights the importance of treating others well and playing a constructive role in society. In contemporary society, designers can stimulate increased participation in social activities and enhance social responsibility by providing shared spaces and public facilities.

Confucian aesthetic concepts counteract the “anti-industrialization” mindset by advocating a return to humanistic sentiments. In contemporary society, by revitalizing the aesthetics of literati through spatial design, and reflecting on the excessively utilitarian lifestyle, spaces can become places for reflection, relaxation, and experiencing humanistic sentiments.

In conclusion, Confucian aesthetic concepts offer profound guidance for contemporary spatial design, emphasizing the harmonious unity of individuals with others, nature, and society. Implementing these insights into spatial design and social planning can contribute to creating more empathetic architectural and urban environments and propel society toward a more harmonious and sustainable direction. Integrating these insights into spatial design and social planning allows us to construct a future society characterized by warmth and inclusivity.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Confucian aesthetic concepts, centered around “Ren”, have had a profound impact on the

layout and spatial design of classical Chinese architecture. Classical architecture inherits and develops the spirit of benevolence, embodying a sense of warmth and vitality, thus becoming pleasant spaces for social emotions and interpersonal relationships. Simultaneously, in the interpretation of spatial and cosmic concepts, classical architecture demonstrates a sense of unified time and space, evolving into works of spatial design with unique aesthetic value. Lastly, through the exploration of contemporary spatial design and social development, Confucian aesthetic concepts offer profound reflections on building a harmonious society and achieving sustainable development. They provide valuable references and insights for contemporary architectural and social design.

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