

The Genius Loci of Chinese Shuyuan from the Perspective of Confucian Culture

Yanhong Fang*

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Ji'nan, Shandong, China

**Corresponding author: Yanhong Fang.*

Abstract

As the core place for scholars to pursue studies, give lectures, and cultivate themselves in the later period of Chinese feudal society, the genius loci of Shuyuan is rooted in the soil of Confucian culture, presenting a unique character of the symbiosis of ritual order and natural interest, and the integration of moral enlightenment and life freedom. Traditionally, there are usually both garden landscapes and high walls in Shuyuan. The garden symbolizes natural will and life liberation, while the high wall represents humanistic order and behavioral norms. Seemingly opposite, the two are organically unified in the academy space. Taking the site selection, environment construction, architectural regulations, and cultural symbols of Shuyuan as analytical dimensions, this paper reveals how the academy space carries the value pursuit of Confucian self-cultivation, scholarship, and preaching through the construction logic of “residing in a scenic place”, “managing water and planting trees”, “complementing ritual and music”, and “harmony between man and nature”. It also explains how traditional Chinese literati architecture achieves a spiritual balance between ritual constraints and natural affinity, providing a theoretical perspective for understanding the cultural connotation of traditional educational spaces.

Keywords

genius loci of Chinese Shuyuan, Confucian culture, garden; high wall, harmony between man and nature

1. Introduction

Genius loci is the unity of spatial form and cultural spirit, representing the value identity and emotional attachment endowed to space by a specific group through long-term practice. Emerging in the Tang Dynasty and developing through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Chinese Shuyuan became comprehensive cultural spaces integrating education, academics, sacrifice, and leisure. Their genius loci is deeply imprinted with the genes of Confucian culture. Traditionally, there are usually both garden landscapes and high walls. The garden represents human beings' pursuit of returning to nature and stretching life, while the high wall symbolizes humanistic order, behavioral norms, and social ethics, forming the basic tension of the academy space.

Based on the Confucian cultural background and taking the binary interaction of “garden – high wall” as a clue, this paper systematically analyzes the spiritual connotation in Shuyuan's site selection, environment construction, architectural regulations, and written symbols. It clarifies how the academy space realizes the

unity of ritual order and musical harmony, human norms and natural freedom, restoring the spiritual world of ancient Chinese scholars who “lived near mountains and rivers, abided by rituals and pursued the Tao”. It also provides theoretical support for the contemporary inheritance of traditional educational spaces.

2. The Natural Foundation of the Academy Space: Selecting Scenic Sites and Garden-style Construction

The formation of the Shuyuan’s genius loci begins with the active selection and poetic transformation of the natural environment. Scholars adhere to the site selection criteria of “surrounded by mountains and rivers, isolated from the hustle and bustle, and beautiful scenery”. By managing water, planting trees, and decorating sketches, they transform primitive nature into enlightening nature, making the space a carrier for moral cultivation and personality formation.

2.1 Site Selection Principle: The Four-Dimensional Integration of Tranquility, Auspiciousness, Scenery, and Reverence

Academy site selection is not random but a cultural act carrying scholars’ value pursuits, mainly following the four principles of “tranquil atmosphere, auspicious geomancy, scenic landscape, and respectful humanism”, summarized by Guo Wei [1], which jointly shape an otherworldly spatial temperament. The site selection of Guangya Shuyuan embodies this logic intensively. Zhang Zhidong visited seven sites in Guangzhou to build the academy and finally chose Yuantou Township in the northwest of the city, because there “exists the Yunshan Mountains winding from the northeast, continuous mountains surrounding the east, the Beijiang River embracing the west, remote mountains north of Zengbu at the back, and the river under Caihong Bridge in front, winding like a belt”, described by Peng Changxin [2]. It boasts outstanding natural scenery, open vision, and seclusion from the hustle and bustle, meeting the quiet atmosphere required for scholarship, as well as the demands of geomantic auspiciousness and cultural admiration.

According to historical records, ideal academy sites generally have four characteristics: first, a tranquil atmosphere, far from the noise of the market, providing a pure environment for studying; second, auspicious geomancy, pursuing the pattern of backing onto mountains and facing water, and mountains surrounding water, in line with the traditional concept of “storing essence and gathering qi”; third, scenic landscape, creating beautiful landscapes relying on natural mountains and rivers to delight and inspire people with scenery; fourth, respectful humanism, prioritizing places with historical allusions and relics of sages to strengthen cultural inheritance and spiritual inspiration. The interweaving of the four principles endows Shuyuan with a spatial background of symbiosis between nature and humanity from the very beginning.

2.2 Natural Transformation: The Enlightening Metaphor of Managing Water and Planting Trees

Chinese Shuyuan is not only located in nature but also is actively transformed, turning water management, tree planting, and landscape creation into spatial languages of moral enlightenment, making every plant, tree, pool, and stream carry Confucian values.

In terms of water management, water has four meanings for Shuyuan: symbolizing the spread of enlightenment, inspiring literary thinking, isolating secular hustle and bustle, and conforming to geomantic auspiciousness. Guangya Shuyuan diverts water from the Zengbu River to surround the whole space, forming a water system similar to a moat, which not only strengthens the separation from the secular world but also echoes the ancient Pan Pool system with a semicircular curved rivercourse, highlighting the symbol of culture and education. The flexibility, tolerance, and endless flow of water are highly consistent with the Confucian concept of “enlightenment like water, moistening things silently”, becoming a spiritual metaphor for scholars’ self-cultivation and scholarship.

Tree planting is another core of academy environment construction, whose value transcends the landscape level and sublimates into a cultural symbol of moral analogy. Shuyuan prefers plants such as pine, bamboo, plum, and lotus: pine and cypress symbolize unyielding integrity, bamboo represents modesty and high moral integrity, plum implies perseverance in adversity, and lotus symbolizes nobility and purity. Zhou Dunyi’s (known as Master Lianxi) love for lotus influenced the construction of the “Gentlemen’s Hall” in Bailudong

Shuyuan, “overlooking the lotus pond, named after the meaning of Lianxi’s love for lotus”, tempering students’ virtue with the character of lotus; Longguang Shuyuan “planted bamboos for chanting and dredged lotus ponds for leisure”, integrating plant landscapes with studying and relaxation, depicted by Chen Gujia and Deng Hongbo [3].

Plants are no longer pure natural beings but the embodiment of gentlemen’s characters and living carriers of moral enlightenment, imperceptibly influencing scholars’ value orientations.

2.3 Sketch Decoration: Expanding the Poetic Dimension of Educational Space

The gardens in Shuyuan are decorated with architectural sketches such as pavilions, terraces, corridors, bridges, and memorial archways, expanding educational scenes for leisure, contemplation, and perception, and deeply integrating natural space with humanistic activities.

Yuelu Shuyuan has sketches such as Aiwan Pavilion, Chuixiang Pavilion, Hexi Terrace, and Baiquan Xuan, either facing mountains and rivers or adjacent to flowers and trees, providing places for scholars to relax, chant, and speculate after lectures. Architectural sketches break the solemnity of architectural regulations, connect ritual space with natural space, allowing scholars to comprehend the way of nature and the principles of sages in the leisure of “walking to the end of the water, sitting and watching the rising clouds”, realizing the unity of scholarship and self-cultivation, rationality and sensibility.

This construction method makes Shuyuan a complete place “for living, touring, studying, and thinking”, laying the natural foundation of genius loci.

3. The Ritual Core of the Academy Space: Architectural Regulations and Confucian Order

If gardens and nature shape the poetic temperament of Shuyuan, then high walls and regulations construct its ethical skeleton. Academy architecture takes lecturing, book collection, and sacrifice as the core regulations, follows the layout logic of central axis symmetry and orderly arrangement, transforms the Confucian order of “ritual” into spatial form, and achieves the goal of carrying ritual through architecture and educating people through space.

3.1 Core Regulations: The Functional Trinity of Lecturing, Book Collection, and Sacrifice

Since the Northern Song Dynasty, Shuyuan has gradually formed three basic regulations: lecturing, book collection, and sacrifice, corresponding to three core buildings: academy lecture hall, library tower, and ancestral hall, supplemented by study quarter, Shanzhanf’s (master of Shuyuan) residence, and leisure spaces, forming a complete functional architectural system.

The library tower is the soul and symbol of Shuyuan. Early Shuyuan took book collection, collation, and reading as core functions, so the library tower was highly respected. It has distinct architectural features: mostly two to three-story pavilions, higher than surrounding single-story buildings, located at the back of the central axis of the building complex, quiet and prominent; the first floor is for borrowing and resting, and the second floor stores books, meeting the needs of moisture protection, ventilation, and lighting, in line with Ye Dehui’s idea in Ten Rules for Book Collection that “a place for collecting books should be a high building, a spacious clean room, and a separate courtyard with high walls”, according to Tian Aoran and Wang Jikun [4]. The towering and independent library symbolizes the loftiness and sacredness of knowledge, strengthening scholars’ awe of classics and orthodoxy.

The academy lecture hall is the core teaching space of Shuyuan, located in the center of the building complex and the middle of the main axis, serving as a place for daily teaching, academic seminars, and debates, undertaking the core function of imparting knowledge and truth.

Sacrificial buildings are mostly located behind the lecture hall or in a separate courtyard, enshrining sages and predecessors, inheriting Confucian orthodoxy, and strengthening the values of respecting teachers and valuing education, and advocating Confucianism and ritual.

Study quarters are for students’ accommodation as well as learning, with scales varying with the size of the academy, reflecting the educational model of “integrating living and learning, focusing on self-study”;

Shanzhang's residence is mostly at the back of Shuyuan, relatively independent, highlighting the dignity of teachers. The organic combination of the three core regulations and auxiliary spaces forms an orderly and complete architectural whole.

3.2 Spatial Order: The Externalization of Ritual and the Enclosure of High Walls

The layout and form of academy architecture are the spatial translation of Confucian ritual-governance order. Represented by Yuelu Shuyuan, single buildings are mainly regular geometric shapes such as rectangles and circles, and building complexes are arranged along a primary and secondary vertical axis, with central axis symmetry and progressive layers, presenting a rigorous sense of order.

This norm is not a mere architectural skill but the embodiment of "ritual"—ritual is a social code of conduct, and architectural rules are spatial codes of conduct, both pointing to order and constraint. The high wall is an important carrier of the academy's ritual space, whose essential function is to isolate inside and outside and strengthen order. A fence is a low-intensity partition, friendly to nature; a high wall is a complete partition, symbolizing the regulation of nature by human will and the constraint of individual behavior by social order. Enclosed by high walls, the academy forms a pattern of external closure and internal order, just like the restriction of ritual on human behavior, maintaining the purity and solemnity of the educational place. Inside the high wall is a sacred space for inheriting orthodoxy, cultivating morality, and pursuing scholarship; outside the high wall is secular life and market noise, with a clear boundary and distinct values.

Notably, the Shuyuan is not completely bound by ritual. Baiquan Xuan on the rear flank of Yuelu Shuyuan breaks away from symmetry and rules, built along the water and flexible, becoming a poetic place for the headmaster to rest and stretch his mind. This design reveals that scholars not only adhere to the order of ritual but also pursue the freedom of nature; they regulate behavior with high walls and liberate the soul with gardens, forming the internal tension of the academy's genius loci.

3.3 Written Symbols: Worship of Characters and Manifestation of Orthodoxy

In ancient times when education was not popularized, characters were a symbol of intellectual power. In Shuyuan, cultural authority is constructed, manifesting Confucian orthodoxy and strengthening the spiritual attribute of the place through written symbols such as couplets, plaques, inscriptions, and naming.

The names of Shuyuan and buildings are mostly derived from allusions, sages, landscapes, and functions, containing educational implications. Wenjin Shuyuan in Tianjin is named after the meaning that "Confucianism is like the sea, and stylistic essays are like a ferry; scholars ask questions and seek advice to attain the great Tao", argued by Deng Hongbo [5], encouraging scholars to devote themselves to Confucian classics and pursue truth.

Couplets and plaques highlight academic concepts and moral codes with concise words. For example, the couplet of Bailudong Shuyuan, "The sun and moon are the eyes of heaven and earth; thousands of volumes of poems and books are the heart of sages", directly expresses the Confucian pursuit of self-cultivation and understanding truth. Stone inscriptions are an important carrier of academy written culture, with a large number of characters and easy preservation, used to record major events such as academy construction, reconstruction, and awards, or engrave school rules and admonitions to warn students and inherit norms.

Whether naming, couplets, or stone inscriptions, the content of characters takes Confucian culture as the core, manifesting the core values of benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and trust, making characters a symbolic expression of genius loci, allowing scholars to feel the edification of orthodoxy all the time.

3.4 Literati Architecture: Spatial Expression of Scholar Culture

Different from secular architecture, official architecture, and Buddhist architecture, academy architecture is a typical literati architecture, carrying the world outlook, aesthetic taste, and value pursuit of the scholar group. Its style is simple, calm, quiet, and elegant, abandoning extravagant carving, in line with scholars' solemn, simple, and minimalist aesthetic; its space takes moral enlightenment as the core, becoming an embodied place where "morality is the foundation, loyalty and faith are the base, benevolence is the house, righteousness is the road, and ritual is the door", just as Wang Yangming advocated [6].

The essence of literati architecture is the spatial expression of scholar culture: transcending secular utilitarianism, pursuing spiritual nobility; abandoning official dignity, adhering to academic independence; breaking away from religious mystery, basing on secular morality. With literati architecture as the carrier, Shuyuan becomes a spiritual home for scholars to cultivate themselves, pursue studies, and preach, demonstrating the cultural character of traditional Chinese scholars.

4. The Philosophical Core of Shuyuan's Genius Loci: Harmony between Man and Nature and Complement of Ritual and Music

The natural interest of the garden and the ritual order of the high wall are not simply opposed to but organically unified on the basis of the Confucian philosophy of harmony between man and nature, constituting the core of Shuyuan's genius loci. This unity transcends the binary division of "ritual as order and music as harmony", pointing to the deep integration of man and nature, norm and freedom, morality and life.

4.1 Organic View of Nature: Moral Analogy and Scene-Emotion Interaction

The traditional Chinese organic view of nature is the philosophical root of Shuyuan's closeness to nature. Scholars do not regard nature as an object of objective cognition but view it from an overall, organic, and personalized perspective, abstract moral laws from nature, and build a bridge between nature and humanity with "moral analogy" as the core epistemology.

"Moral analogy" is to empathize the physical characteristics of natural objects into moral qualities, using things to metaphorize people and scenery to clarify truth. The firmness of pine, the modesty of bamboo, the nobility of lotus, and the tolerance of water all become symbols of gentlemen's characters. Scholars create an academy environment surrounded by mountains and rivers with lush vegetation not only for beautiful landscapes but also to build an enlightening space full of moral hints, allowing students to comprehend the way of nature and the principles of sages in leisure and contemplation, achieving the educational effect of "clearing the mind for scholarship and nurturing virtue". This scene-emotion interaction makes nature no longer external to humanity but an organic part of moral enlightenment, realizing the isomorphism of nature and spirit.

4.2 Harmony Between Man and Nature: Transcending Binary Holistic Wisdom

The academic circle often explains the harmony of academy architecture with "complement of ritual and music", holding that regulations represent ritual and gardens represent music. This paper argues that this interpretation is still trapped in dualism, while harmony between man and nature can better reveal the philosophical essence of Shuyuan's genius loci.

According to *Book of Rites · Record of Music* states, Music is the harmony of heaven and earth; ritual is the order of heaven and earth. Both ritual and music originate from heaven and earth, not opposites. Ritual is an external order norm, and music is an internal harmony guide, both serving social governance and ethical education, with natural foundations. Chinese philosophy does not separate subject and object but emphasizes that man is in nature, imitating and conforming to nature. Laozi said, "Man models himself after earth; earth models itself after heaven; heaven models itself after the Tao; the Tao models itself after nature", pointing out that the ultimate criterion of human behavior is nature; I Ching says, "The movement of heaven is full of power; thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring; the earth's condition is receptive devotion; thus the superior man holds the outer world with virtue", directly linking the virtues of heaven and earth to gentlemen's personalities. Within this framework, the high wall and garden, ritual and nature of Shuyuan are not a confrontation between human will and natural will but two sides of the unity of man and nature: the ritual of the high wall originates from natural order, being humanity's imitation of nature; the music of the garden originates from natural harmony, being humanity's closeness to nature. Academy architecture not only follows the order of ritual but also embraces natural interest; it not only highlights order with regular layout but also creates flexibility with garden sketches, realizing the perfect unity of order and freedom, norm and ease, humanity and nature. This unity is the spatial presentation of the Confucian spirit of "moderation and harmony" and the philosophical core of Shuyuan's genius loci.

5. Conclusion

The genius loci of Chinese Shuyuan is a concentrated presentation of Confucian culture in spatial form, taking the dialectical unity of garden and high wall as the external form, harmony between man and nature and complement of ritual and music as the philosophical core, and self-cultivation, scholarship, and preaching as the value orientation. From the perspective of spatial construction, Shuyuan takes “tranquility, auspiciousness, scenery, and reverence” as site selection criteria, realize natural gardening through water management, tree planting, and sketch decoration, and build a poetic enlightening space; take lecturing, book collection, and sacrifice as core regulations, highlight the order of ritual with central axis symmetry and high wall enclosure, and build a rigorous ethical space; manifest the character of scholar culture with written symbols and literati architecture, and build a space of spiritual belonging. The three dimensions support each other, making Shuyuan a complete place unifying natural beauty, architectural beauty, moral beauty, and spiritual beauty.

From the perspective of spiritual core, Shuyuan’s genius loci transcends the binary opposition of “ritual constraint” and “natural liberation”, realizing the symbiosis of ritual order and musical harmony, and the integration of moral norms and life freedom under the guidance of the philosophy of harmony between man and nature. It not only reflects scholars’ adherence to social order and Confucian orthodoxy but also demonstrates their pursuit of natural authenticity and life freedom, shaping the spiritual prototype of traditional Chinese scholars who “live in the secular world but transcend it, abide by rituals and pursue the Tao”.

The construction of contemporary educational spaces can draw three inspirations from Shuyuan’s genius loci: first, educational spaces should integrate nature and humanity, making the environment a hidden curriculum, educating people with scenery and nourishing the heart with environment; second, spatial order should balance norm and freedom, with both institutional constraints and personality stretching, realizing the unity of strict management and sincere care; third, genius loci should be rooted in cultural core, integrating value pursuit into spatial design, making educational places a carrier of cultural inheritance and spiritual growth. Although Shuyuan has become history, the Confucian wisdom, scholar character, and educational ideal carried by their genius loci still have timeless value. An in-depth interpretation of the academy spirit between garden and high wall is not only a historical review of traditional educational spaces but also provides traditional nourishment for the cultural construction and spiritual remodeling of contemporary educational spaces.

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