May 2020

Architecture and Geography of China Proper: Influence of Geography on the Diversity of Chinese Traditional Architectural Motifs and the Cultural Values They Reflect

Shiqi Liang
University of California, Los Angeles

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp

Part of the Architecture Commons, and the Human Geography Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/csp/vol12/iss1/3

This Main Theme / Tema Central is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Culture, Society, and Praxis by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.
Architecture and Geography of China Proper: Influence of Geography on the Diversity of Chinese Traditional Architectural Motifs and the Cultural Values They Reflect

Shiqi Liang

Introduction

In 2016 the city government of Meixian decided to remodel the area where my family’s ancestral shrine is located into a park. To collect my share of the compensation money, I traveled down to southern China and visited the ancestral shrine for the first and last time. It was my first time seeing southern Chinese buildings, and their unique differences struck me deeply. Born and raised in northern China, I was accustomed to rectangular, flat, and short houses. Seeing my ancestral shrine, tall and circular, almost shaped like a fortress, opened my mind. The demolishment of my family’s ancestral shrine encouraged me to search for a reason behind the regional architectural motif differences.

This acknowledgement of architectural diversity is especially important in this era of rapid modernization. To accommodate a fast-growing urban population, real estate developers favor tall, rectangular, concrete apartment buildings over traditional Chinese architectures. The buildings in northern cities no longer look distinguishable from buildings in southern cities. Revisiting those diverse architectural motifs serves as a reminder of how diverse China proper really is.

Geographical and Climatic Regional Differences

Zhongyuan (中原), more commonly known by the name North China Plain, served as the heart of early Chinese civilization because of its favorable geographical and climatic conditions that supported early development of states and governments. Zhongyuan is very flat with few mountains; its soil is rich because of the slit carried down by the Yellow River. Its temperate zone climate helped facilitate healthy crop growth with its cold, dry winter. Its proximity to nomadic tribes from northern deserts and steppes also stimulated early development of state governments, as inhabitants needed to band together to defend themselves. These ingredients of power quickly allowed Zhongyuan to become the cradle and heart of Chinese state and empires.

In contrast to Northern China’s temperate, flat, and wide land is Southern China’s tropical, mountainous, and rocky features, best exemplified by the Canton region. The Canton region receives plenty of rainfall in the summer due to the influence of monsoon seasons that create many branches of rivers, fracturing the Canton region. South China’s agricultural history is not as long as North China’s: its tropical weather and...
unequal distribution of rainfall across seasons did not support early development of agriculture (Pan, 1995). Due to its rocky features and agricultural malleability prior to more advanced techniques, the Canton region was hard to reach in ancient times. This degree of geographic isolation gave Cantonese culture its distinctivity and autonomy. The vast linguistic differences between Mandarin and Cantonese are a reflection of that autonomy.

Lying between the Canton region and North China is the Yangtze Plain, widely referred to as Jiangnan, which literally means “South to the Yangtze River.” Ever since ancient times, Jiangnan had been the center of economic and cultural development. Physically, the Yangtze Plain is a series of alluvial plains and the Yangtze River’s major tributaries, making it exceptionally suitable for rice farming and freshwater fishery (Falkenheim and Hung, 2016). Its warmer weather also made agriculture more prosperous, allowing Jiangnan residents to harvest two crops instead of just one each year. Its efficient agriculture did not only earn the title “land of fish and rice,” but also transformed Jiangnan into a center of development in art and humanities, as well as a strong economical center (Falkenheim and Hung, 2016).

Figure 1: Climate zones of China. East of the thick red lines is a rough definition of China proper (Lin et al., 2015)
Culture, Society, and Praxis

Diversity in Architectural Motifs across China

Zhongyuan’s long history with states and empire has caused its culture to have a strong emphasis on social hierarchy. To showcase military and political power, Northern Chinese buildings are often single-storied yet wide to symbolize the vast flat plain those buildings sit upon. This emphasis was also caused by the limitation of the readily-available material in Zhongyuan: wood. Wooden structures are vulnerable to damp weather, insects, and fire, so building a tall wooden structure is rather inconvenient considering the cost of maintaining it. The arrangement of Zhongyuan houses also reflects social hierarchy valued by Confucius’ teaching that originated from Zhongyuan. In a traditional Siheyuan (四合院), a type of rectangular dwelling, the northern building that gets the most sunlight is reserved for family elders, who are considered to be “master of the house.” The building behind it that gets the least amount of sunlight is for unmarried daughters and female servants, who are on the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

Spring 2020, Vol. 12, Issue 1
Figure 3: Inside of the Siheyuan of Qi Baishi, a famous Chinese painter (National Architecture Institute of China, 2017).

Figure 4: Tulou in Fujian. Note its thick walls and lack of windows as fortification (UNESCO, 2020).
Southern China, because of its relative isolation and autonomy, places a heavy emphasis on protection and equality among family members. Because of its lack of governance, Southern China was plagued by bandits. Inhabitants were forced to build fortified communal dwellings to protect themselves and their properties. A tulou (土楼), typically in Southern China, is a tall, rectangular or circular dwelling for a family clan that places a heavy emphasis on defense. Its thick walls are immune to firearms, its doors are made out of fireproof wood, and its roofs facilitate more accurate firing. Southern China’s isolation from the North also allowed its inhabitants to enjoy relative equality within the family clan, as social hierarchy from Confucius’ teaching was not as influential as it was in the North. All rooms in tulous are of the same size and same building material, with the exception of bigger family branches getting bigger rooms. Yet that was out of consideration of comfortable living spaces, rather a reflection of social hierarchy.

Jiangnan buildings share many similar motifs with northern China considering their geographical proximity, such as emphasis on social hierarchy. At the same time because of its different geographic factors, the people of Jiangnan also developed their unique architectural motifs. In Jiangnan’s humid weather ventilation and sunlight is especially important, so Jiangnan buildings are often multi-story and intentionally have spaces between walls for ventilation. Walls in Jiangnan are also thinner because otherwise, those walls would never dry. Jiangnan architecture often integrates rivers into part of daily life, taking advantage of the cheap transportation and blooming trade these water routes provided (Gong, 2009)

In comparison to Northern Chinese architecture which uses a lot of color, Jiangnan architecture is very plain. Typical Jiangnan buildings with black roof and white walls lack the variety in colors commonly observed in Northern architecture. Chinese architect and scholar Liang Sicheng is believed to have thought that this difference was caused by the different climate between North China and Jiangnan, but some of his research on the subject did not survive. North China has a relatively long winter and autumn where flowers and trees wilt, while the growing season is longer in Jiangnan. With flowers blooming almost all year long, it seems excessive to paint the walls with different colors when nature served as the ornaments (Gong, 2009).

Another iconic feature of Jiangnan is its lavish gardens. If North China’s emphasis on width is a showcase of its political power, than Jiangnan gardens are a showcase of economic power. Jiangnan residents have the economic privilege to build lavish gardens just for aesthetic purposes. The North also has its own lavish gardens, but those are reserved for the royal family only. Such luxury for members outside of the royal family was only made possible due to the wealth accumulated in Jiangnan.
Figure 5: Scenery in Jiangnan. Note its little use of color and integration with local rivers (Guo, 2009).

Figure 6: Jiangnan gardens often included ponds, sculptures, buildings, rare plants and other architectural miscellaneous that reflected the owner’s wealth. Zhuozheng Yuan (拙政园), which roughly translates to “humble administrator’s garden”, is a classic piece of Jiangnan gardening. It consisted of 48 different buildings, 21 precious trees, 40 steles, 101 tablets, and countless bridges connecting series of pools and islands. (Ministry of Culture, 2003) It is also massive: composed of three sectors, Zhuozheng Yuan takes up 51,950 square feet (Zhangzhugang, 2015)
Architecture as a Reflection of Human Geography

By examining regional differences in architectural motifs, it became clear that people of different regions adopted different cultural values, with the ultimate cause being different geographic factors. Geography has immediate direct influences on architectural motifs, such as limiting readily available building materials. However, it also had a more subtle influence on human society and culture that led those societies to reflect elements they prioritize in their architectural motifs. These distinctive architectural motifs—heavily fortified tulous, lavishing Jiangnan gardens, wide and flat Siheyuan—are a reflection of diversity among Chinese societies caused by geographic variation.

With the recent industrialization and modernization, more and more traditional architecture is being replaced by mundane mass-produced apartment complexes to accommodate the booming population. Yet it is nevertheless still important to protect and maintain this traditional architecture: their differences serve as a reminder of how diverse human societies are. As we become more and more integrated with each other, there has never been a better time across history to celebrate the diversity within us.

Figure 7: Comparison of geographic features, climatic features, and architecture across Chinese regions
References


