

An Exploration of Underlying Consciousness of Chuan Di Xia's Settlement Environment

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ABSTRACT

Beijing Chuan Di Xia can be traced back to Ming and Qing Dynasties. It is located beside the old post way in the west of Beijing. At present, there are more than seventy units of traditional courtyard houses of Ming and Qing Dynasties and the antique features of the surroundings still survive. The dwelling suited to the historical and regional context and the profound cultural values accumulations etc., have precious historic and cultural values. Associated with the investigation of Chuan Di Xia, the paper explores the site selection, the layout, the spatial constructiveness and the underlying consciousness of Chinese traditional dwellings, unveils the common philosophic basis of traditional dwellings and offers new thought for sustainable human settlements.

Key Words: Historic features, Environment consciousness, Cultural consciousness, Spatial consciousness, Culture values

All traditional Chinese village dwellings unexceptionally incarnate a thought of adjusting measures to local conditions, building house geomantic ally and constructing with proper materials from the aspects of site selecting, layout, spatial arrangement and material construction of a single building etc. In Previous studies on traditional dwellings, besides the tangible architectural layout, structure and decoration, the underlying consciousness with rich cultural connotation contained in the structure has attracted broad attentions from all circles. The underlying consciousness hidden in the village dwellings reflects ideas of nature, society, economy, culture, social psychology and philosophy. The artistic

conception, image, spirit, dynamic and impression consciousness accumulated in the buildings endowed village dwellings with strong vitality, which makes them live through such a long history.

The ancient dwellings in Chuan Di Xia, which are preserved pretty well, were analyzed in the paper from three aspects: the ecological harmony between man and nature; the morphological order of Li Yue (standard of rites and harmony); people's psychological need of happiness and being far from evil. The purpose is to unveil the underlying reasons why people pay much attention to geomancy, patriarchal clan system and auspice in the designing and to enlighten professionals' creative thought by exploring the cultural connotation of artistic

conception, image, spirit and impression of the traditional dwellings.

I. THE ECOLOGICAL HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

The ancestors of Chinese people had a premature "environmental consciousness". That's because agriculture is the characteristics of China's ancient civilization. In the long history of farm work, the ancients learned that natural factors such as weather and geographic conditions have close relation with their production and life. Predominated by the idea of "animism", all natural things that closely related to human beings, including heaven and earth, sun and moon, wind and cloud, hills and rivers, were their worship objects when holding sacrifice fete. After a long period of history, this kind of worship to nature gradually accumulated into the cultural psychological structure of a nation, which was philosophically called the thought of "harmony between man and nature". In the construction of traditional dwellings, the thought was expressed through their environmental consciousness of respecting the nature, abiding nature law and keeping a friendly attitude toward nature. People tended to adjust measures to local conditions and pursue a harmonious relation with nature.

"Fengshui", a Chinese word literally means water and wind, equal to the word "geomancy", is a kind of environmental science incarnating Chinese traditional natural conception of "harmony between man and nature". It reflects the gravitational field of natural force. The premise of geomantic theory is that heaven, earth and man form an organic whole. Heaven's favorable weather, earth's advantageous terrain and human unity restrict each other respectively. The famous remark-everything on

earth opposes the Yin and faces the Yang, the energies of Yin and Yang must be balanced-in the book named *Lao Zi* (written by Lao Zi, the founder of Taoism, in the Spring and Autumn Period), is regarded as the classics of geomancy. Mountains, hillocks, watercourses and vegetation are vital factors in human life. For several thousand years, the intuition and experience of Chinese people made them recognize that "facing the house onto the sunny side" and "backing it onto the shadowy", and "backing onto the mountainside" and "facing onto the water side" are the ideal settlement for human beings. In the thought of "harmony between man and nature", the integrity of heaven, earth and man is regarded as the environmental abstract and frame; the harmonious social relation coexists with the rhythm of nature. In order to reach an ideal state, that is, to create a remarkable place that produces outstanding people, the dwelling designer must know the role of mountains and water, select the right facing direction, respect the natural form and make good use of the sites' topographic feature.

In the selection of site, there must be a process of searching for "Long"(dragon-the mountain on the background), surveying "Sha"(the central site), observing "Shui"(river) and choosing "Xue"(the place for the coffin chamber), which in Chinese means to evaluate the site by its natural environment such as mountains and rivers. The Chi (energy of earth) comes out from mountains and gathers in rivers by the surrounding landform. A site with mountains and rivers in the right places will have Chi gather there. To create an ideal environment, the key point is to make good use of the natural topography, harmonize the relation between indoor and outdoor conditions and design a reasonable spatial layout. Chuan Di Xia is a typical village of geomantic style from the aspects of site selection, layout and spatial arrangement etc..

The ancient village lies in deep valleys northwest of Zaitang town, Mentougou district in the west of Beijing, which belongs to the Basin of Qinghe River, with well-preserved vegetation. It is said that the ancestors of the villagers moved into this area from Dahuaishuxia village of Hongtong County in Shanxi province in the Yongle period of Ming Dynasty. The place was formerly named Hanxinglaofenchu (the old burial place of a Han's family). But it was completely destroyed by a severe flood in the mid-Ming Dynasty because of its low topography. Later, the settlers established a village in the present place of Chuan Di Xia village. The village lies at a south-side slope in the middle of "Shuangshitou village" and an ancient post way named "Yixiantian". Looking from the whole environment, the site is in a gorge going from east to west, surrounding by mountains of different sea levels and various spectacular shapes. Grand mountains behind the village form a barrier holding up the chilling wind and gathering warm air from south. A warm microclimate is naturally formed in the site. When it is freezing outside the mountain area, spring is still in the air of the village. With a new-moon-shaped pond in front of the village, mountains standing behind as a barrier and the protection of multi-level sand hills at the left and right sides, a relatively close geographic environment that "baking onto the shadowy side and facing onto the sunny side" and "holding wind and gathering Chi" is created. According to the natural topography, the settlers selected Hushan Mountain as its back, the round and full Longtou Mountain as its center, together with the highest point of Jinchan Mountain to make a geomantic axis from north to south. Then the pivotal line backing Longtou Mountain and surrounding by Hushan, Guishan, Bianfushan and other mountains was determined to form a geomantic layout (Figure 1) of an

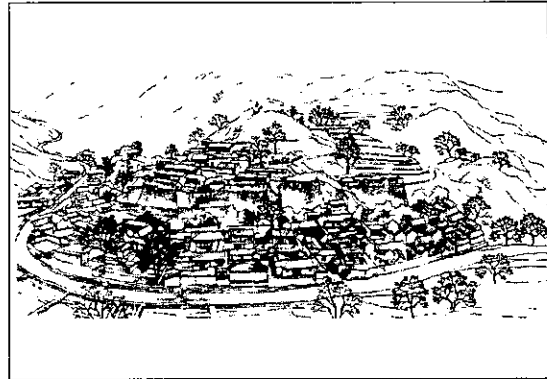


Figure 1. Birds'-eye view of Chuan Di Xia

environment with higher front and lower back, the two sides inclined toward the center and springs lingering around. Over seventy units of ingenious traditional courtyard houses were constructed by building terraces along the contour line at the flat slope in front of Longtou Mountain (which is called the Mmingtang-the central site in geomancy). With the ascending of mountain topography, the buildings incline toward both sides to form a fan-shape. A huge wall of nearly one hundred meters' long divides the village into two parts like a bow. At the lower terrace of the village, an arch-shaped dyke for flood control spanning more than one hundred meters winds around, which makes the village organically integrate. Besides a major road connecting the two parts of the village, two narrow stepped paths were built from up to down, with the additional function of flood control and guarding against bandits (Figure 2). The layout is not only a proper arrangement of space without occupying arable land, but also provides the village with agreeable ecological condition of good ventilation, sufficient sunshine, deep water, fertile soil, luxuriant vegetation and beautiful mountains (Figure 3). This shows that the suburbanites of Beijing City possess rich knowledge of dwelling environment construction, that is, living in high place with sufficient water source but never flooding, with

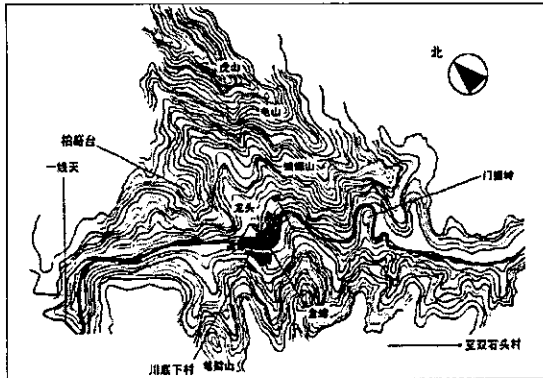


Figure 2. "Fengshui" pattern of Chuan Di Xia

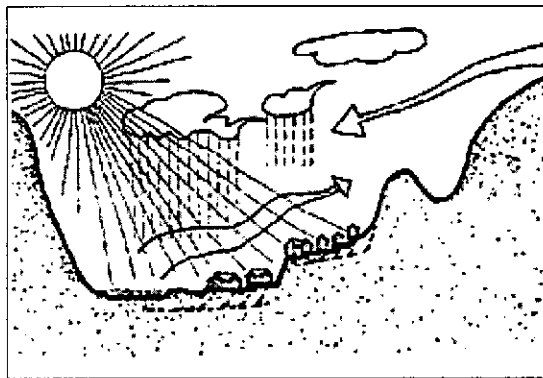


Figure 3. Good ventilation and sunshine

verdant vegetation but still having enough sunlight. In the term of geomancy, that is "a remarkable place producing outstanding people". The activity space in the village was arranged according to the change of topography, where roads are straight or zigzag and spaces open or close in picturesque disorder. Houses were built with local material, whose drainage system was organized in accordance with the topography of mountains. Thus, a wonderful village environment blended in the nature with natural and artificial beauty was created reflecting the builders' ecological conception of man in harmony with nature.

II. THE MORPHOLOGICAL ORDER OF LI YUE

The order of Li Yue is an intensified patriarchal clan system in the building of traditional dwellings, which reflects a special image.

Nurtured in the spirit of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism for long years, ancient Chinese people formed a firm idea of patriarchal clan system of the order of heaven, earth, king, parents and master that consists the core of social ethics. They regarded the dwellings as "the hinge of Yin (earth) and Yang (heaven), the standard pattern of human relations". Li requires that every residence has a saint place that can not be offended. To maintain social order, a set of social ethic ideas was established, that is, "Li means that the standard of rites varies with the social status of people". These ideas were the significant base of a society. The traditional dwellings in Chuan Di Xia completely show the influence of the ideas.

Accompanied with Li is Yue. In the book Yue Ji, it was written that "Yue means the harmony of heaven and earth; and Li means the order of heaven and earth. Harmony means that everything can be converted and order means everything is different from each other." Yue reflects a kind of social culture, which in dwellings is expressed as a stylized pattern to show a certain image. China is a country rich in forms of Li Yue. The long-term influence of Li Yue can be felt to different extent in different forms such as marriage and funeral ceremonies, social status, housing class, spatial construction, layout, etc.

Though not of a large scale, the environment creation of the ancient village Chuan Di Xia incarnated the human relation of patriarchal clan system and traditional ethical ideas of the society

linked by kin relation. All habitants in the village are descendents of the Han's family. Although no ancestral hall was built in the village, the stability and development of the whole family of Han's have been maintained by traditional clan worship spirit such as making genealogical tree, recording burial places of their ancestors and setting up village rules etc. Completely symmetry and formal layout of village environment and courtyard houses, which represents sublimity, was not extremely pursued because of topographical limitation. But the order of spatial arrangement still shows apparently that emphasis was laid on the difference of age, family position and social status (Figure 4). Guang Liang Yuan, a south-facing courtyard house built at the highest point of the village at the foot of the Longtou Mountain, is the living place of the oldest person of the village. It is the only five-room building in the village, with the largest scale and the best decoration. This is a manner through which the

family members show their respect and piety to the senior. At the entrance of the village, a temple was built to show respects to God Guandi, a legendary character that represents the spirit of loyalty, piety, moral integrity and righteousness, to teach people ethical morality and standardize their behavior with the spirit. A statue of dragon king was also set in the temple for the villagers to "offer sacrifice to the dragon king and pray for rain", by this they pray for good weather to bring them good harvests. The Temple of the Goddess of Fertility at the entrance of the village is a place for the villagers to pray for happiness, longevity, giving birth to son and protection from disasters. In addition, there are public activity places-square of lights, stone grind field and well platform, etc.-to strengthen the neighborhood relation. The created environmental system of "religion" and "ethics" in Chuan Di Xia provides with the villagers a place to conduct education and activities of traditional "culture of Li Yue". By this way, the villagers' feeling of morality was deepened and the whole village became a small harmonious society where people live closely and friendly.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMAND OF HAPPINESS AND BEING FAR FROM EVIL

Praying for happiness and being far from evil is one of people's psychological needs. People also express their will and interest in good luck in the building of village dwellings.

Chuan Di Xia's ancient dwellings were decorated with different patterns of paintings and symbols, with every painting or symbol having an auspicious meaning to express people's pray for good luck. All of the layout and orientation of buildings, the decorations and literal captions, book

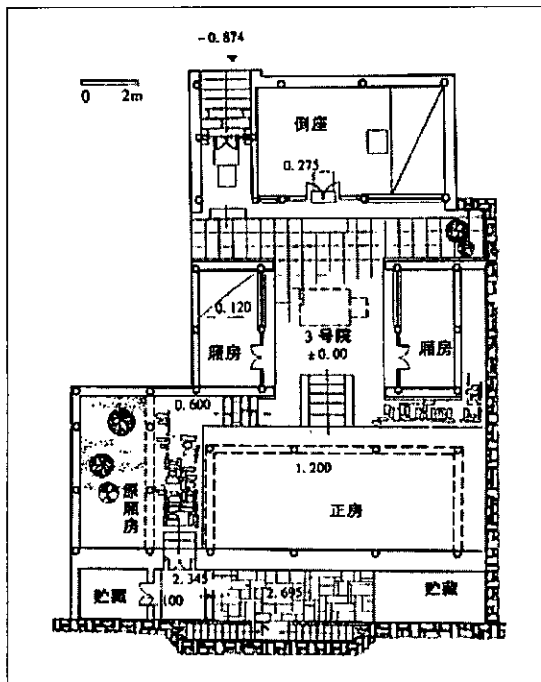


Figure 4. The plan of mountain quadrangle-houses

and paintings unexceptionally reflect the villagers' aspirations, their psychological balance and self-solace.

The patterns, designs, characters and symbols, whether involved in astronomy, geography or human affairs, are mostly established by usage. Their stylized patterns reflect the social fashion and preference.

For Chinese people, it is a kind of virtue to be implicit and covert. So in traditional dwellings, it is unfit that the gate goes straight to the central hall. The technique of "Yu Yang Xian Yi", meaning the best is often hidden behind a so-called screen, is frequently used by the designers. In the traditional dwellings of Chuan Di Xia, a screen wall decorated with auspicious designs or frescos symbolized happiness and longevity was always erected in front of or behind the gate to divide and emphasize the interior and outer space (Figure 5). The psychological foundation of paying attention to the decoration of gates is a kind of self-emphasis. So decorations of gates and signs of entrances were always worked out after repeated deliberation. Take a certain courtyard in Chuan Di Xia village as an example, a stone chessboard was set using one side of the screen wall at the entrance, with the

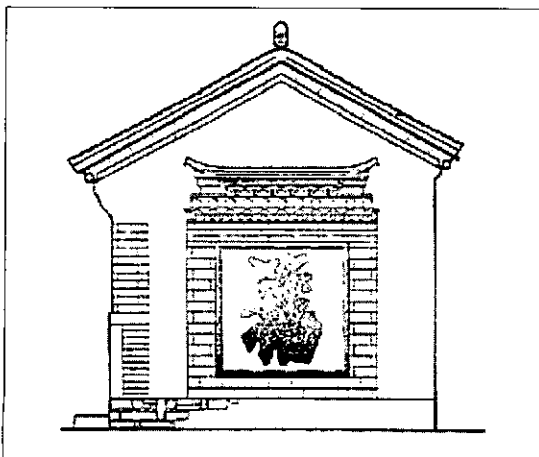


Figure 5. Screen wall

accompany of several stone stools. This kind of simple establishment tells us the leisure and peaceful life of the villagers in Chuan Di Xia. The front square of a house shows the scale of the building and the social status of the owner. In ancient time, horse is the major transportation tool. Horse staying facilities such as "horse-mounting stone" and "horse-tying stone" were always set in front of the house. The ancient Chuan Di Xia village was one of the villages sitting beside the major trading road where a lot of merchants stayed and rested. So it is a way for the housemasters to show his hospitality by setting "horse-mounting stone" and "horse-tying stone" at the right place of the entrance.

All of the designs and patterns of the decoration around the gate space, including those of the inside and outside eaves, were endowed with the meaning of happiness and longevity, safety and satisfactory. Animals, plants, human affairs, literature, etc. are often used in the decorations of buildings as symbols of auspicious, using the technique of sound borrowing and meaning implication. To a certain extent, they reflect the ancient villagers' disposition and aspiration. Take the stone carving at the entrance of a dwelling house (Figure 6) for example.

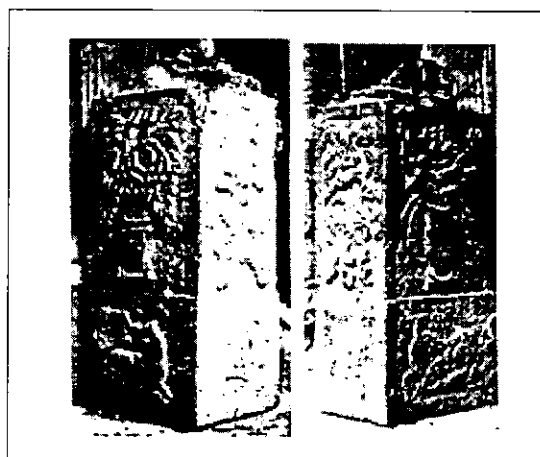


Figure 6. Stone carving at the entrance

The frontispiece of it is an embossment of a bat holding a copper coin in its mouth, below carved with peaches offered as birthday present. The side face embossed with rhodea japonicas in vase, below carved with megrenates. All of the designs have auspicious meaning. In Chinese, bat is pronounced Bian Fu and copper coin Tong Qian. By connecting the sound together they mean Fu Dao Yan Qian (happiness is coming around). Rhodea japonicas means evergreen in Chinese, allegorically it means being safe for ten thousand years. The combination of rhodea japonicas and birthday peaches means longevity of ten thousand years. Even such a small gate block shows that the Chuan Di Xia villagers strongly yearn for a happy life.

Ancient Chinese village dwellings belong to a special type of architecture. They have the longest history, the largest number and the richest cultural

connotation. They are precious heritage of history and culture. The development of the world brings an increasingly better recognition to the culture of ancient village dwellings. More and more experts from home and abroad and all circles pay great attention to it. After an investigation on Chuan Di Xia, the author got a deep impression upon the typical ecological culture contained in the design of the village dwellings. The natural, harmonious living environment represents the unsophisticated and compatible relation between man and nature, and that of people and people. Containing a multi-dimensional imago and connotation and the spirit of Chinese civilization, the village dwellings reflect the traditional culture of China's settlement environment. They are of significant reference value to the development of modern human settlements in urban areas.

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