



Research article

The return of tradition: a preliminary study on the integration of traditional concepts of space with contemporary Chinese urban space

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Abstract

As the speed of urbanisation, which is driven by power and capital, has slowed down on the Chinese mainland, the connection between human emotion and urban space has gradually been gaining attention. Moreover, traditional Chinese culture is attracting more and more interest because of people's nostalgia for rural life. This study examines how the traditional Chinese understanding of space is integrated into contemporary architecture, and people's perception of it, to bring meaningful urban space. The methodology in this study collects the characteristics of the Chinese concept of space and investigates how to translate these characteristics into contemporary concrete spatial forms. Furthermore, a felt-phenomenology study of cases located in contemporary urban space is used to examine whether this transformation is feasible. Traditional Chinese thinking is correlative, focusing on the relationships between things rather than rational or logical thinking of things themselves. In traditional Chinese courtyard buildings, for example, this correlative

thinking is expressed in the contrast between void and solid. Moreover, the subjective spatial experience arising from the rhythm and ambiguity, which is brought by the interplay between the void and the solid in traditional courtyard architecture, may suggest an absence of connection between the urban space and human emotions. Meanwhile, in contemporary urban space, rhythm and ambiguity can be informed by the research of specific case studies, such as SHUM YIP UpperHills LOFT, the West Village and Raffles City Chengdu.

Keywords traditional Chinese concept of space; contemporary urban space; art of line; void; solid; rhythm; ambiguity

Introduction

The interaction between globalisation and localisation frequently results in the erosion of the latter by the former.¹ Globalisation is defined as a process of comprehensive communication and interaction across national and regional boundaries.² In this process, a specific entity or phenomenon can be easily disseminated throughout the world.³ Since the 1990s, the United States has been regarded as the dominant force in the process of globalisation, and the consumerism promoted by American society has spread globally through the circulation of capital. In contemporary consumer society, the representation of images plays a pivotal role. Architecture, too, has become a commodity with a strong symbolic and visual dimension.⁴ The objective of architecture is to make a building iconic, and the celebrity architect travels globally to design such buildings in different cultural and political contexts.⁵ China is a nation most enthusiastic about globalisation,⁶ and cities in the country have become the testing ground for celebrity architects. The CCTV Headquarters is an example of an iconic building, and it is globally renowned for its distinctive shape: 'The imbalanced, asymmetrical nature and arbitrary siting of Koolhaas's television megastructure preclude it from having any urbanistic or symbolic significance, except as a gargantuan representation of manipulative media power.'⁷

The impact of globalisation on localisation has also given rise to a backlash from the latter. Due to political reasons, between the late Qing dynasty (1840–1912) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), traditional Chinese culture was severely jeopardised. In many Chinese cities, the response to tradition is reflected in the visual form of pasting traditional architectural symbols on the façades of modern buildings. This has resulted in a disconnection between tradition and contemporary life. Since the 1990s, China has undergone a period of rapid urbanisation, and people in urban space have been neglected.⁸ As previously mentioned, one of the reasons for this is the visualisation of architecture. Vision is 'the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived',⁹ and visualised architecture tends to create a world that cannot evoke the experience of interiority: 'A remarkable factor in the experience of enveloping spatiality, interiority and hapticity is the deliberate suppression of sharp, focused vision.'¹⁰ The recent deceleration of urbanisation has prompted a re-evaluation of the quality of urban space, which refers to public space that pays more attention to people's experiences and feelings. In this context, traditional Chinese thinking may offer some valuable insights, given that traditional Chinese courtyard architecture is designed with the specific intention of creating experiences through the interplay between void and solid.

Chinese concept of space: art of line

The Chinese conception of space privileges the intangible over the tangible. This is reflected in the dialogical relationship between architecture (tangible) and its sociocultural meanings (intangible) through perception (impression) and conception (expression).¹¹ This conception of space resonates with traditional Chinese aesthetics which focus on the 'density of soul'¹² (*yi'jing* 意境) created by the combination of objects rather than on the objects themselves.¹³

The way we perceive space is influenced by cultural factors. Ancient Chinese thinking is known as correlative thinking,¹⁴ and it is characterised by an emphasis on the relationships between things rather

than on the rational or logical analysis of individual entities.¹⁵ According to François Jullien, traditional Chinese thinking is concerned with betweenness.¹⁶ Betweenness is defined as the in-between of two opposites, and it eschews the analysis of any particular point of view in the dichotomy. As the *Book of Change* (*Yi'jing* 易经) indicates, everything in the universe is created by the interplay of *yin* and *yang*. The Chinese concept of betweenness is called *jian* (间) and the ancient character of *jian* (間) shows that moonlight passes through the gap between door frames. This implies that 'instead of the door being opaque and blocking out, some in-between remains, which indefinitely lets through — the wind, life and the light'.¹⁷

The concept of betweenness is also reflected in traditional Chinese architecture. Traditional Chinese buildings 'focused not on single, independent buildings but on vast complexes with interconnected and well-coordinated parts spread out over a large area'.¹⁸ This interconnection and coordination refers to the harmonious interplay between the solid of the building and the void of the central courtyard. In ancient China, architecture with a central courtyard was conceived for a wide range of functions and it was hugely popular throughout the country. Furthermore, 'the horizontal expansion of Chinese buildings into an organic complex virtually transforms spatial consciousness into a concept of time'.¹⁹ It is this flowing space based on a temporal process that gives rise to the aesthetic of traditional Chinese courtyard buildings.

The subjectivity of the traditional Chinese concept of space

In contrast to Western architecture, which is characterised by distinctive façades, the traditional Chinese building requires its inhabitants or visitors to navigate the alternation between void and solid. This temporal space is regarded as the art of line. For the ancient Chinese, the term 'deep mansion' was used to describe a large mansion formed by the horizontal extension of multiple courtyards, which illustrates the ancients' intuitive response to the linearity of courtyard architecture.

This spatial linearity is suggestive of the Confucian concept of ritual propriety in ancient times: 'Chinese houses exhibit a clear spatial hierarchy that mirrors the relationships among the family living within them and their interaction with visitors. Adjacent open and closed spaces help define this spatial hierarchy, aided in fundamental ways by the purposeful use of gates, screen walls, and steps.'²⁰ In the third chapter of *The Story of the Stone*,²¹ Daiyu's path from the corner gate of Rongguo Mansion to her grandmother's room provides a clear illustration of this spatial hierarchy. More specifically, after entering through the corner gate, the sedan chair bearer hired at the pier stopped at a corner. Furthermore, the male servants stopped in front of a festooned gate, while the female servants led Daiyu through a courtyard, a hall and another courtyard to meet her grandmother. The cessation of the attendants' activities foreshadowed a gradual change in the meaning of space. These changes between the interior and the exterior were not accomplished in a single moment by a door or a particular architectural construct but rather by a process that occurred over time. The Rongguo Mansion was constructed at the behest of the emperor and was required to adhere to the Confucian concept of ritual propriety, which necessitated the establishment of a structured order within the space.

The linear space formed by the alternation of void and solid reflects not only cultural meanings but also the emphasis on subjective perception. In the novel *The Yellow Storm*,²² four generations of a family reside in a small quadrangle dwelling. The linear space provides the family with a sense of security in times of war. For those residing in the quadrangle, the distance between the city centre and their residence is considerable and this distance is not an objective one but a subjective one. The house is only accessible from the city's main thoroughfare via a narrow alleyway, which then leads into a concealed alley. Although the flows between all these spaces are not partitioned, the change in spatial meaning – from city road to alley entrance, to the alley, to residence – progressively becomes more private, and it lengthens the distance between the house and the city.

In traditional Chinese architecture, space is conceived as a dynamic interplay between subjective (cultural meaning and individual perceptions) and objective (architectural space) elements. Subjective elements are regarded as a guiding force influencing the objective elements. In the contemporary era, the Confucian concept of ritual propriety lacks the social context necessary for its continued survival. Nevertheless, the emphasis on subjective perception in traditional Chinese architecture could offer some inspiration for the contemporary cities that isolate people and space.

As seen earlier, space in traditional Chinese art is regarded as an art of line. It can be observed that 'lines have become the soul of many types of visual and performing arts in China'²³ and a line can express

art because it can carry rhythm. In Chinese calligraphy, the most representative art form of traditional Chinese art, the variation of lines created by soft brush strokes, brings about the rhythm, that is, 'lightly or heavily, swiftly or slowly, with or without force or effect; for the making of curves, turns, pauses, and transitions; for rhythm and cadence. In all these respects, lines play the leading role, like the melody in music'.²⁴ Furthermore, rhythm engenders vivid imagery and a living line could be perceived to 'transmit the artist's sensation of movement into the artwork, and from there directly into the body of the viewer'.²⁵ In other words, through the rhythm, the line is 'closely associated with emotion because visual lines can unfold and express tension, climax, and resolution just as musical compositions do'.²⁶

Rhythm can be seen as a derivative of betweenness, which is an intermediate situation between two opposite poles and the central focus of traditional Chinese thinking. Rhythm is considered to be a regular oscillation between these opposites. Moreover, ambiguity is another derivative of betweenness. Correlative thinking implies that 'the ambiguity, vagueness and incoherence associable with images and metaphors are carried over into the more formal elements of thought'.²⁷ Both rhythm and ambiguity encourage the subjective to participate. In other words, rhythm can be readily perceived by the body's senses, and the body is readily attuned to rhythm. For instance, rhythm in music can readily cause the human body to sway. Meanwhile, ambiguity allows for the incorporation of subjective elements by reducing the clarity of objective representation. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, parts of the mountains and water are often hidden in clouds and mist, and this ambiguity is often considered to be profundity. More specifically, ambiguity brings about the absence of certainty: 'submersion in absence, far from rendering reality unreal or phantasmagorical, increases its quality and capacity'.²⁸ By abandoning the directive and commanding power of symbols, ambiguity allows the viewer to be free from the constraints of the opposition between subject and object. Furthermore, the possibilities are enhanced with the addition of subjective perception and imagination.

It is not possible to reproduce traditional courtyard architecture in the contemporary urban environment. However, the concepts of rhythm and ambiguity, which have been refined from traditional Chinese culture and space, can facilitate a close connection between people and urban space.²⁹

Rhythm

The Western notion of rhythm is closely associated with prosody and music. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines rhythm as 'the systematic grouping of musical sounds, principally according to duration and periodical stress; beat; an instance of this, a particular grouping or arrangement of musical sounds'.³⁰ Moreover, rhythm is regarded as 'an inherently temporal phenomenon: rhythmic structure or organization unfolds in time'.³¹ In ancient China, rhythm was also associated with prosody. In the great preface to *Shi'jing* (诗经, *The Book of Poetry* or *The Book of Song*), rhythm is considered to assist the ancient Chinese to express their emotions: 'The affections are stirred within and take on form in words. If words alone are inadequate, we speak them out in sighs. If sighing is inadequate, we sing them. If singing them is inadequate, unconsciously our hands dance them and our feet tap them'.³²

During the Wei-Jin dynasty (220–420), *yun* (韵), the Chinese concept of rhythm, became a significant factor in evaluating individuals' abilities and character traits. This was because people at that time liked to expound their academic and political views through debates, and the voice became the main factor in judging a person's knowledge.³³ Furthermore, rhythm is thought to reflect the temperament and inner beauty of a person's life, and it further extends to all aspects of traditional Chinese art. The concept of rhythmic vitality (*qi'yun'sheng'dong* 气韵生动), which can be understood as 'the life-movement of the spirit through the rhythm of things',³⁴ has become the key principle of all arts. In calligraphy, the art form that best exemplifies the art of line, rhythm is brought about by the contrast in lines, strokes, characters and the colour depth of ink, which contributes to 'the expression of an intrinsic interest in life'.³⁵ In traditional Chinese aesthetics, emotion and experience are of paramount importance. The integration of emotion and reason, and the wisdom embedded in emotion, is seen as a means of achieving harmony and satisfaction in life.³⁶ Rhythm, which is a carrier of emotion, is therefore seen as a key factor in achieving these goals.

Psychologists posit that rhythm is associated with aesthetic perception owing to three key aspects. First, it facilitates the emergence of a better perceptual gestalt. Second, it produces anticipation and predictability, which are crucial for the creation of emotions and meanings. Third, it is beneficial to the formation of long-term and short-term memory, which is the basis for appreciating and understanding

artworks.³⁷ Meanwhile, the perception of rhythm is embodied and the emotions it evokes are abstract without concrete direction. In calligraphy, rhythm is not merely an imitation of external forms but rather an expression of the life force inherent in nature.³⁸ Furthermore, the appreciation of a work of calligraphy is not a matter of rational analysis but rather a sensational immersion in the work itself. This process is not merely one of acceptance; it is also one of creation. In the bodily immersion experience, the perceiver becomes one with the rhythms in the calligraphy, and this reciprocal relationship activates the body's movement and produces a vivid image. Consequently, although the characters in calligraphy are static, the viewers can still perceive the dynamism inherent in the art form.

In the traditional courtyard building, people's linear movement between void and solid creates the differences in the senses of vision, smell, touch, hearing, taste, bone and muscle, which create a rhythm that in turn produces an immersive experience. In traditional courtyard architecture, the size or scale of an individual building does not matter; what is vital is the variations and contrasts between spaces.³⁹ Therefore, 'Chinese architecture is to be experienced from within rather than viewed from without. A fixed perspective of visual effect on form is less emphasized than the dynamic process of the experience of space.'⁴⁰ The description of architecture in Chinese novels makes use of the notion of cognitive space; 'such a mapping of space, more specifically between "seeing" and "going": a dynamic narration in the logics of metric and visual accessibility in spaces, aims to make the reader "see" (experience)'.⁴¹ The third chapter of *The Story of the Stone*, which was referred to in the preceding section, allows the reader to construct a relationship between a series of constructions, such as a festooned gate, courtyard, hall and so on, from Daiyu's perspective. Furthermore, the reader can gain an insight into the strict etiquette implied within the space. Meanwhile, in *The Yellow Storm*, the relationship between the Qi family's house, the alleyway and the city is depicted through the perspective of the great-grandfather, which allows readers to experience the sense of security that the great-grandfather believes is inherent in the house.

In calligraphy, the lines formed by the strokes of characters and the rhythm produced by the layout of characters express the emotions of the calligrapher and their personality. Similarly, the alternation of void and solid in traditional Chinese courtyard buildings also reveals the disposition of architecture, the 'equipmental quality of equipment'⁴² or the truth. More specifically, central courtyard architecture is widely used in China, and the ratio between the surrounding solid and central void is adapted to the local environment and climate. In brief, in northern China, the size of the courtyard is much larger to ensure sufficient sunlight inside. In contrast, in southern China, the courtyard is much smaller to provide shade inside and good ventilation. In other words, the collaboration between void and solid reflects the environment and climate. Furthermore, the viewer can appreciate the spiritual realm through the rhythms in calligraphic works.

As previously mentioned, rhythm facilitates human immersion in the providers of rhythm, such as calligraphy or courtyard architecture. This immersion, in turn, engenders creativity. The spiritual realm produced by the viewer of calligraphy can be viewed as an embodiment of this creativity. As Baek indicates, in immersion, 'the reciprocity between what the perceiver can take in and what the world offers activates movements of the body toward the creation of things into which the surplus is invested'.⁴³ This creation is not a reproduction of the concept that the author wishes to express; rather, it is 'an extension of the bodily subject that accommodates the surplus that the sensing body alone cannot fully accept'.⁴⁴ As Guangqian Zhu indicates, the calligraphy of Zhenqing Yan evokes the image of a majestic mountain, and one's muscles will automatically tense up and imitate its solemnity. In contrast, Mengfu Zhao's calligraphy evokes the image of a gently swaying willow in the breeze, prompting a relaxation of the muscles to emulate its graceful movement.⁴⁵

In traditional Chinese courtyard architecture, all the surrounding rooms are orientated towards the central courtyard. In everyday life, people traversing these spaces experience a dynamic interplay between solid and void, accompanied by fluctuations in light, temperature, sound, smell and so on. These changes give rise to specific rhythms, which in turn shape the emotional experience of residents or visitors. For instance, in northern China, the stark contrast between the expanse of the void and the tangible presence of the solid creates a pronounced sensation of division. The frigid wind and frigid temperature of the courtyard sharply contrast with the warmth of the indoor environment. Concurrently, the sound of the wind whistling in the courtyard is distinct from the sound of burning wood or charcoal indoors. In this stark contrast, the body can perceive the rigidity and power of Zhenqing Yan's calligraphy. In southern China, buildings often open up a larger area to the central courtyard and utilise a considerable amount of transitional space, which serves to create a gentler contrast between void and solid and evokes tenderness in those who experience it.

SHUM YIP UpperHills LOFT

The rhythm created by the linear movement between void and solid facilitates the immersion of people into the environment, which can be applied to contemporary urban space. Furthermore, the SHUM YIP UpperHills LOFT project (henceforth SYUL) offers insights into the potential applications of rhythm in urban space.

The theme of SYUL is void versus solid. As shown in Figure 1, the overall layout of this program is a cluster of smaller buildings situated within a mountainous landscape of a larger, more imposing structure. The project is situated in Shenzhen, China, a city that has undergone rapid development, with vast urban blocks divided by expansive expressways. SYUL employs contrast and rhythm to make these vast urban scales inhabitable.

Figure 1. Model of the SHUM YIP UpperHills LOFT project



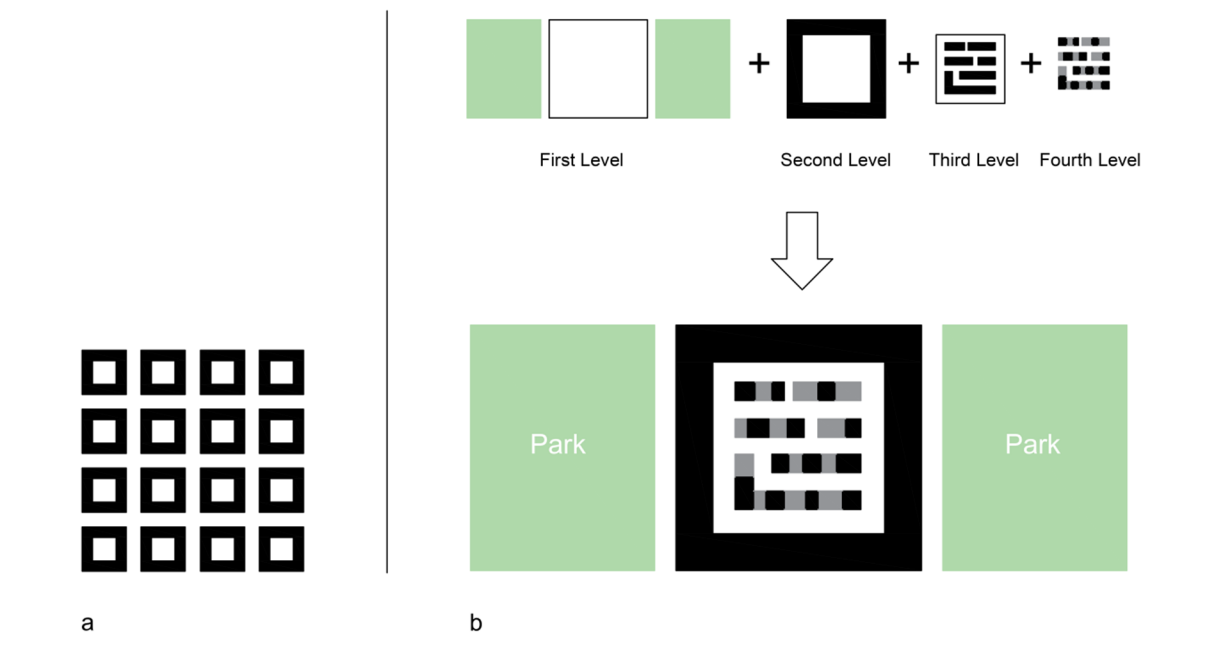
However, the rhythmic interplay between void and solid conditions in this project differs from that of the traditional courtyard building, where void and solid form a basic unit that is repeated horizontally (Figure 2a). SYUL employs a pattern of four void-and-solid units or contrasts wrapped around each other (Figure 2b). The four layers of contrast are as follows: (1) the contrast between the artificial construction and the natural landscape, given that the project is situated between two urban parks; (2) the contrast between the surrounding structures and the central buildings; (3) the contrast between the buildings and the gaps between them; and (4) the contrast in colour and height between buildings.⁴⁶

In rapidly expanding Chinese cities, entire blocks are often occupied by large buildings that create a separation between people and the surrounding environment. To circumvent this issue, the SYUL project transforms a sizeable block into a combination of multiple buildings that provide a rich sensory experience for people. As illustrated in Figure 2 and the preceding paragraph, the layout between the buildings and the comparison between the buildings and the surrounding environment is categorised into four levels of contrast. Meanwhile, the rhythm created by these contrasts facilitates the integration of people with the space.

In this project, the contrast of space introduces variations that affect the body's senses, which in turn elicit emotions. The project has two principal points of access: one via the shopping centre situated below the project and the other via a staircase located on the side of the aforementioned shopping centre. The two entrances, one leading through the expansive interior of the shopping centre and the other through the staircase with a view of the concrete forest formed by the surrounding tall buildings, provide access to the small-scale space enclosed by imposing structures. This enclosed space, also referred to as a 'small town', conveys a distinct atmosphere. Indeed, the dense arrangement of the small-scale buildings creates a relatively calm atmosphere. With the change in colours and heights of

the buildings creating variety, people will not feel bored while wandering between different buildings. Meanwhile, both sides of the 'small town' lead to city parks, thereby facilitating a transition from the oppressive urban environment to the relaxing natural landscape. In a sense, a visit to this project is seen as a musical composition, beginning with a tense melody and then becoming increasingly soothing. There is no doubt that musical rhythm merges people with the musical composition. 'A person listening to music experiences the rhythm as something beyond all reflection, something existing within himself.'⁴⁷ In a sense, alternations in the built environment influence perceptions of the human body, and this leads to the establishment of rhythm, which facilitates a more harmonious integration between people and their architectural surroundings.

Figure 2. The void versus solid pattern in (a) traditional Chinese courtyard buildings and (b) the SYUL project



Ambiguity

The concept of ambiguity is another derivative of the notion of betweenness, in that the status between two opposing points is inherently ambiguous. Meanwhile, ambiguity permeates every aspect of Chinese culture. In Chinese landscape paintings, ambiguity implies a focus on modifications, or potential possibilities, rather than clearly distinguished states.⁴⁸ Furthermore, as the distinction blurs and the clarity recedes, the painting gives up its visual power and the image in the picture is no longer simply symbolic. Meanwhile, the spectator is no longer merely a passive recipient of pictorial information, and the opposition between the spectator and the subject is blurred. 'The painter thereby invites the beholder to reinscribe [their] individual existence within the continuous course of the great process of the world.'⁴⁹ In brief, ambiguity serves to diminish the boundary between subject and object, thereby facilitating their integration.

As previously stated, traditional Chinese courtyard architecture focuses on the linear movement of people between the void and the solid. Meanwhile, within this linear process, the transformation of spatial meaning is a process of gradual modification rather than a split-second judgement. In other words, architectural components such as doors and walls no longer possess absolute authority in determining the meaning of architectural space. Instead, they serve as mere reminders. The constant change of people following Daiyu's route from the entrance of Rongguo Mansion to the room of her grandmother, as previously mentioned, serves to illustrate this point. In a sense, as the objective architectural construction loses its absolute authority, cultural factors begin to intervene in defining the

meaning of space. Meanwhile, this ambiguity gives rise to the imagination. In *The Yellow Storm*, the quadrangle courtyard house is small but the distinction between inside and outside serves as a process. That is, the alley space outside the main entrance of the house is perceived as an extension of the internal space. Additionally, the gradual transition between the interior and exterior is a key factor in the house's sense of security. In summary, the alternation between void and solid generates a linear space that diminishes the impact of objective architectural elements on spatial interpretation, thereby introducing ambiguity.

The penetration of ambiguity into traditional Chinese courtyards is not limited to the points mentioned above. In general, ambiguity in courtyard architecture can be categorised into two principal types. One is the ambiguity of spatial meaning, such as the distinction between inside and outside, private and public and so on, and the other is the ambiguity of spatial function.

Ambiguity of spatial meaning

In addition to the ambiguity introduced by the linear movement between void and solid, as previously discussed, the objective properties of space can also contribute to ambiguity. The transitional space can be an illustrative example of this phenomenon. In the traditional Chinese courtyard building, a variety of transitional spaces are employed, including corridors, deep eaves, and open halls exposed to the central courtyard and so on. A transitional space represents a coexistence and continuation between two opposite spaces. 'In an intermediate zone, opposing, contradicting elements exist together, producing an undifferentiated, vague nature. This undifferentiated, vague element exists at all boundaries and peripheries. As it is undifferentiated, it includes dense and deeply significant shades of meaning.'⁵⁰ Transitional space blends opposing elements, which brings indefinability and inspires subjective imagination and creativity.

In addition, small open spaces also bring about an ambiguity of spatial meaning. The side courtyards have a strong sense of enclosure owing to their small size, resulting in a strong sense of interiority, which is called internal exterior space (*nei'hua'de'wai'kong'jian* 内化的外空间).⁵¹ Small spaces are personal and intimate since they subconsciously provide a sense of security, akin to being wrapped in a mother's arms as a baby.⁵² Similar to transitional space, spaces that blur the boundary between public and private can be perceived as attractive owing to their potential for creativity.

Ambiguity of spatial function

The ambiguity of space is also manifested in the indeterminacy of spatial function. In traditional Chinese courtyard architecture, an all-purpose design (*tong'yong'she'ji* 通用设计) is often adopted.⁵³ In ancient China, the function of artefacts was designed to be flexible, so that they could be useful even when the environment changed. In the field of architecture, the central courtyard arrangement is employed in the construction of a wide variety of structures, including residences, temples and government offices. Since some ancient Chinese would donate their homes to become temples, it is possible for a courtyard building to change from a residence for a few people to a temple that offers the opportunity for many people to visit and pray. The layout of many buildings scattered around the central courtyard provides flexibility, and the side buildings could be dismantled to ensure the passage of a large number of people.

The function of individual rooms is equally flexible, and the building is perceived as a shell that does not align with the dimensions of the furniture. The room is large and high and differs from the furniture, which is perfectly matched to the dimensions of the human body.⁵⁴ The flexibility of the room's functionality is that of in-betweenness; its functionality shifts between various functions. This perception is corroborated by the interior space of traditional Japanese architecture, which is never fixed. The size and shape of rooms could be changed based on the needs and preferences of their inhabitants.⁵⁵ This fluidity and mutability is called *ma*,⁵⁶ which is the equivalent of the Chinese concept of *jian* (间),⁵⁷ the betweenness. In architecture, a gap in functional meaning allows for subjective and future possibilities to emerge.

As previously mentioned, the ambiguity in landscape painting renders the images less distinct, thereby facilitating subjective participation in the processing of pictorial information. Similarly, the ambiguity present in courtyard architecture facilitates the integration of the subjective with the objective. More specifically, as the meaning and function of space become indistinct, certainty is obscured and

possibilities emerge. Concurrently, the subjective begins to integrate into this potential. The next section will present two examples of ambiguity in contemporary Chinese cities.

Raffles City Chengdu: the amalgamation of architecture and city

Permeability is a defining feature of the Raffles City Chengdu project and it represents the actualisation of the architect's theory of porosity. For Steven Holl, the architect of this project, porosity develops 'the possibility of a collection of things held together in a new way where the "horizon" is open and merges with both exterior and interior'.⁵⁸ The porous space in Holl's ideas is akin to the traditional Chinese courtyard building, as both exemplify a blurring of boundaries between opposing elements. This project is a manifestation of the concept of porosity, embodying the ambiguity through two aspects: first, the incisions in the buildings permit urban space to permeate the project; and second, the fragmentation of the building façade and the irregular boundary of the central square facilitate a unification of the two.⁵⁹

The central plaza of this project is subdivided into three small squares of irregular shapes and varying heights, which align with the irregular and disparate shapes of the surrounding buildings. Moreover, the sculptures displayed on the façades of the buildings are echoed by the featured landscape in the squares. Meanwhile, the dispersed arrangement of the buildings allows the landscape of the city surroundings to penetrate. Figure 3 shows the interconnectedness and permeability of the urban space, buildings and central squares. As one traverses the squares, layers of space are superimposed, creating an ambiguous spatial experience with no clear order. 'When internal boundaries are vague or ambiguous, time is made or perceived to "stop" and space becomes timeless and limitless.'⁶⁰ This quality of timelessness and limitlessness is both immersive and intriguing. The purpose of ambiguity is not to create chaos but rather to shape a richer spatial experience. This is achieved by encouraging the viewer to think and explore, rather than accepting the order of the space directly.

Figure 3. Raffles City Chengdu



The West Village

The architect of the West Village has sought to express traditional aesthetics with contemporary techniques, achieving this goal through the receptivity it exhibits. In the Chinese context, receptivity represents freedom. In contrast to the Western concept of freedom, which emphasises the abandonment of the old world and independence from it, receptivity 'inserts us into it, by connecting us to its surge, impelling us to make use of its resources without challenging it'.⁶¹ In the context of the West Village, receptivity is particularly associated with ambiguity through the flexibility it displays. The most intuitive manifestation of flexibility can be observed in the blank treatment of the façade. This approach is taken because the specific commercial type is yet to be determined. Consequently, the project should be

designed as a simple frame that can accommodate different types of use, much like a bookshelf waiting for different books.⁶²

In the West Village project, the concise façade, which is adapted to maintain the flexibility of occupying business, together with the low-profile building height and simple enclosed layouts, together make up a weak form.⁶³ This weak form removes traces of deliberate design and blurs the stylistic attributes. Figure 4 offers an understated impression of this project as observed from the central courtyard. As the fluidity and mutability in traditional courtyard architecture bring about subjective creative engagement, the weak form undermines the autonomy of the architect and allows the everyday life of the public to enter. In a sense, the familiarity brought by ambiguity unites the public with this project.

Figure 4. The West Village



Conclusions

The neglect of human emotions in modern architecture, with its emphasis on function and efficiency, has been a long-standing concern for architects. Meanwhile, architects and scholars, inspired by phenomenology, have begun to focus on the perceptual experience of human beings in space. This approach posits that 'the authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the tectonic language of building and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the senses'.⁶⁴ This constant dialogue and interaction between people and the environment facilitates the integration of the two. In contrast to Western traditions, traditional Chinese aesthetics prioritise emotional and experiential aspects over rational cognition. In traditional Chinese courtyard architecture, rhythm and ambiguity prompt the human body to engage with space, and space imbued with feelings and associations through this experience. Furthermore, these two aspects offer a means of addressing the neglect of human emotions in contemporary urban space.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a debate between scientific, rational Western culture and the non-analytical traditional Chinese culture. Today, this debate manifests itself as a contradiction between globalisation and localisation. Tradition has always attracted the attention of contemporary Chinese architecture. In contemporary society, the embodiment of traditional thought should be related to the lives of people rather than simply viewed as a symbol. In light of this consensus, the responses to tradition are only discernible in textual discourses. However, there has been little scrutiny of how traditional spatial and aesthetic ideas can be applied in practice to contemporary urban space. This study provides a brief overview of the use of rhythm and ambiguity in contemporary urban space. The three cases presented in this study, all of which have received positive recognition in terms of

shaping urban public space, indicate that rhythm and ambiguity can be applied to contemporary urban space and shape meaningful urban space for the public by evoking human experience. On the one hand, the SYUL project creates a significant space in a large-scale block through layers of contrast and it produces a rhythm that connects people to the building. On the other, the Raffles City Chengdu and the West Village create evocative spaces by blurring the boundaries between the building and the city, as well as by being flexible about reality.

The combination of tradition with the contemporary is a highly complex issue, and this research has only attempted to distil some ideas from traditional spatial and aesthetic thinking of Chinese contemporary urban space. Undoubtedly, a more detailed study of the working of both rhythm and ambiguity in contemporary urban space is still needed.

Notes

- ¹ Ricoeur, 'Universal civilization and national cultures', 277.
- ² Cai, '全球化与当代国际关系' [Globalisation and contemporary international relations], 19. In this article, translations from the Chinese was made by the author.
- ³ Fan, '全球化背景下的中国大陆媒介与大众文化' [Popular culture and media on mainland China in the framework of globalization], 68.
- ⁴ Hua, '消融与转变-消费文化中的建筑' [Melting and transforming: Architecture in consumer culture], 134–7.
- ⁵ Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 344.
- ⁶ Liu, *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*, 4.
- ⁷ Frampton, *Modern Architecture*, 345.
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