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A COURTYARD HOUSE – *SIHEYUAN* 四合院 AS THE DWELLING PLACE OF THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE FAMILY

Abstract: A Chinese courtyard house, called in Chinese *siheyuan*, equipped with a single entrance and with one or more open courtyards encompassed by one-storey buildings, represents traditional house dwelling in China. Throughout Chinese history, courtyard dwelling was the basic architectural pattern used for building governmental (palaces and offices) and family residences, and religious compounds (temples and monasteries). In this short contribution, the author depicts a standard traditional Beijing court house from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) which would normally host an extended family of three and four generations. The physical construction and spatial structure of the traditional Chinese courtyard house were deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical thought. The Chinese used *fengshui* (wind and water) principles to harmonize themselves with their environment in order to secure prosperity, longevity, and family blessings. From the viewpoint of *fengshui*, a basic courtyard house compound was not only a dwelling place, but also a structured and complicated vision of the cosmos that should function as an ideal container of *qi* (life energy). The fundamental north-south axis which rhythmically and continuously guarantee the vital flow of *qi* and the square shape of a courtyard house which means near to the earth, should promise health, prosperity, and the growth of the family. The *fengshui* system (nowadays mostly associated with Daoism) in the context of a Chinese courtyard house was intimately combined with China's strict social and family system (Confucianism). The structure of the Chinese traditional family – and the author calls it “Confucian familism” – i.e., the Confucian conviction of family as a model for the whole state. This rigid and hierarchically structured family system, which had been the basis of Chinese society in imperial China for over two thousand years, has been reflected in courtyard house compounds. At the end of this contribution, the author mentions the efforts of present-day architects to find a way to revive traditional courtyard housing for modern times.

Keywords: Chinese architecture, Chinese courtyard house, Chinese traditional family.

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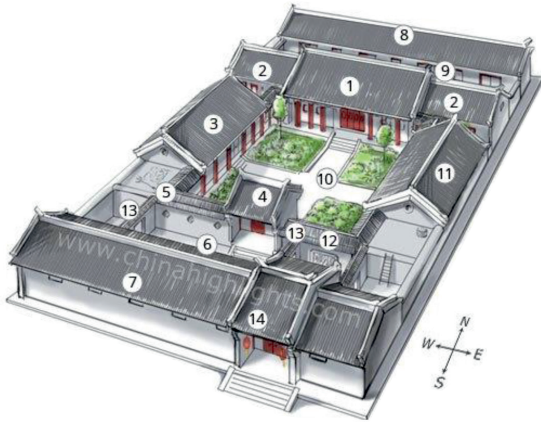
Introduction: A Historical Sketch of Courtyard-house Architecture in China

A *siheyuan* is a Chinese quadrangle, i.e., a walled architectural compound, a courtyard house, with a single entrance and with one or more open courtyards encompassed by one-storey buildings. The courtyard dwelling is the traditional house form in China. Such a courtyard house is one of the oldest types of not only Chinese, but also generally of human habitat (India, the Middle East, Mediterranean regions, North Africa, and ancient Greece and Rome). (Blaser, 1995; Knapp, 2005) Archaeological excavations confirm that the earliest unearthed courtyard house in China represents the so-called Yangshao 仰韶 culture (5000–3000 BC: the first excavated site of this culture discovered in 1921 in Mianchi 滎池 County, Henan province) which belongs to the Middle Neolithic period. (Liu Xujie, 2002, pp. 11–31) The main reason for the preference of courtyard houses in China must have been climatic factors and natural environmental conditions which were from the very beginning connected with socio-cultural developments. Thus, a courtyard house as a residential compound with a set of courtyards enclosed by the surrounding building and high walls on four sides guaranteed from the very beginning a shelter from cold and warm, rainy and too sunny weather, social security, and family privacy. Courtyard housing in China was also called a Chinese quest for harmony. (Zhang, 2017, pp. 38–56)

As mentioned above, courtyard dwelling as the basic architectural pattern in Chinese history would normally host an extended family of three and four generations.

1. The Typical Structure of Ming-dynasty (1368–1644) Courtyard Dwelling in Beijing

The key feature of a Chinese courtyard house is the fact that its structures encompass at least one or two courtyards. Depending on the family size and its wealth, it can be one, two, three, or even more open courtyards. Below we see a typical Beijing Ming (1368–1644) dynasty model which was also continued during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). (Fercility, 2020)



- 1 – Zhengfang – master residence or wing
- 2 – Erfang – "ear" room, utility or storage room
- 3 – Xixiangfang – western residence or wing (West Chamber)
- 4 – Ermen, Chuihuamen – second gate, "flower-hung gate"
- 5 – Zoulang – corridor
- 6 – Waiyuan – outer or first courtyard
- 7 – Daozuofang – "reverse-facing" rooms
- 8 – Houzhao Fang – north hall or pavilion, "backside building"
- 9 – Disanjinyuan – rear or third courtyard
- 10 – Neliyuan – inner or second courtyard
- 11 – Dongxiangfang – eastern residence or wing
- 12 – Yingbi – spirit screen
- 13 – Pingmen – entranceway or small gate
- 14 – Damen – main gate

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1) The main house / hall (*zhengfang* 正房) the most northerly and usually reserved for the eldest of the family ("pater familias" as the oldest living male in a household, excising authority over his extended family / household head; normally grandfather with his wife). This house was regarded as the best one, facing south, having good lighting, and being a shelter from the wind;

2) Side rooms (*erfang* 耳房: lit. ears' rooms, because they stuck out to either side of the main house like ears): These two small rooms were children's or servants' accommodation. They also served as a cooking place or storehouse;

3) Western wing building (*xixiangfang* 西厢房) and 11) eastern wing building (*dongxiangfang* 東厢房): Western wing building, regarded as inferior to the eastern one, was given to unmarried daughters or served as kitchens; the eastern wing building was occupied by married sons;

4) The second gate (*ermen* 二門) or the flower-hung gate (*chuihuamen* 垂花門): This is the inner gate, separating the first courtyard from the second one. The decorations of this gate were considered to express the status of the family.

5) The corridors (*zoulang* 走廊) were on both sides after the second gate, i.e., east and west, where family members dwelt according to family status, the younger and unmarried living closer to the front of the courtyard house;

6) The outer, i.e., first courtyard (*waiyuan* 外院). In courtyards trees were planted to express the wish for prosperity and longevity.

7) The reverse-facing room(s) (*daozuofang* 倒座房): These rooms faced north; with poor lighting they were normally the accommodation for servants;

8) North hall or pavilion / "Backside building" (後罩房): This building existed only in the courtyard houses with three or more courtyards; it was used for unmarried daughters or female servants;

- 9) The rear, i.e., the third courtyard (*di san jinyuan* 第三進院);
- 10) The inner, i.e., second courtyard (*neiyuan* 內院): the biggest and central courtyard where the whole extended family could gather together at various family occasions and festivals;
- 11) see 3);
- 12) The spirit screen / spirit wall (*yingbi* 影壁): Its function was to protect the family after the outsiders / guests came in the household, leading them to the small gate;
- 13) The small gate / entranceway (*pingmen* 屏門): A kind of screen door between the outer and inner courtyards;
- 14) The main gate (*damen* 大門): The front gate divided the inside life of the family from the outside world. The size of the front door was a token of social status of the family. For wealthy homes, two stone lions for protection and exquisite decorations of the main gate were something obvious.

A traditional Chinese courtyard house would usually accommodate an extended family of three or four generations. Courtyards (*yuanluo* 院落 / *tingyuan* 庭院), being a key architectural element of the Chinese courtyard house, were also called light wells (*tianjing* 天井). The size and the shape of courtyards were decided by the need of sunlight desired in this housing compound. That is why northern and southern courtyards have different sizes: the former are larger to allow abundant sunlight in the winter, the latter smaller to reduce the summer sunlight. (Zhang, 2017, p. 3)

Below we will describe a traditional Chinese courtyard house as “the soul of Chinese architecture.” (Zhang, 2017, p. 39)

2. *Fengshui* 風水 (Chinese Geomancy) and Socio-hierarchical Correspondences Written into Courtyard-house Architecture

The physical construction and spatial structure of the traditional Chinese courtyard house are deeply rooted in ancient Chinese philosophical thought. (Xu Ping, 1998, pp. 271–282. Hwangbo, 2002, pp. 110–130) The Chinese used *fengshui* principles to harmonize themselves with their environment in order to secure prosperity, longevity, and family blessings. *Fengshui*, literally meaning “Wind-Water” or “Wind and Water,” is an ancient Chinese system of principles considered to govern spatial arrangement and orientation in relation to the flow of *qi* 氣 and methods of how to reach the positive and favorable *qi*. The original designation for the discipline is *kanyu* 堪輿 ([dao of] heaven and earth). Its favourable or unfavourable effects are taken into account when designing buildings. Without going into details whether *fengshui* is a proto-science or

pseudo-science, (Dukes, 1971, pp. 833–834) or even superstition, (Zhang Yong-feng – Dai Wei, 2013, pp. 61–69) in the following we will depict some basic aspects of its importance in Chinese architecture. Here we want to mention that this way of thinking belongs to so-called “correlative thinking” which is a species of analogy, found both in classical Chinese “cosmologies” (correlative cosmology already in the *Yijing* / the Book of Changes¹). It involves the association of images and series of concepts related by culturally meaningful analogies rather than physical causation. Correlative thinking has preponderance of analogical procedures characterizing both association and differentiation which on the whole opposes common assumptions about causal necessity (cause-effect thinking).

2.1. The Ideal *Fengshui* Model of Landforms and a Chinese Courtyard House

One of the teachings of *fengshui* is that Father Heaven (symbolically thought round) fertilizes Mother Earth (symbolically thought square) with *qi* as a movable positive or negative life energy. The source of this life-bringing energy is Father Heaven who sends it Mother Earth by rain and water (*shui*) with wind (*feng*). In site selection for building a house, it was one of the *fengshui* rules “to avoid cold wind that blows *Qi* away; another is to have water that brings and accumulates *Qi*. Ancient Chinese believed that *Qi* would bring health, peace, and luck.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 272)

The ideal *fengshui* space is a balance or harmony of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 (literally and respectively: “the shady side” and “the sunny side” of the mountain). In Chinese thought (cf. *Yijing*), they are two opposite or contrary forces like “dark and bright,” “negative and positive,” “female and male,” “bad und good,” “hill-*yin* and water-*yang*” etc. which at the same time are complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world; they may give rise to each other as they interrelate with one another. *Yin* and *yang* together build a wholesome unit.

“The design concept of the Beijing courtyard dwelling is a courtyard enclosed by buildings. The major rooms face south, with the two wings together forming a U shape, as a symbol of the “tiger and dragon hills.” The opposite screen wall with its hanging flower gate symbolizes “the facing mountain.” The yard is a symbol of the open space in the natural landscape. The entrance is located at the southeast corner of the house, the direction from which, according to *feng-shui*, the vital *Qi* comes. In the house, the courtyard (*Yang*) is enfolded by

¹ *Yijing* is an ancient Chinese divination text and one of the oldest of the Chinese classical works. Being originally a divination manual in the Western Zhou period (1000–750 BC), it was transformed over the course of the Warring States period and early imperial period (500–200 BC) into a cosmological text with a series of philosophical commentaries. (Cf. Kern, 2010, pp. 1–115)

surrounding buildings (*Yin*); the balance between them symbolizes family harmony and invites happiness and prosperity.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 273)

From the above quotation, we can see that from the viewpoint of *fengshui*, a basic courtyard house compound was not only a dwelling place, but also a structured and complicated vision of the cosmos (here we only touch the rudimentary knowledge of *fengshui*) that should function as an ideal container of *qi*. The fundamental north-south axis which rhythmically and continuously guarantee the vital flow of *qi* and the square shape of the courtyard house (squareness is the symbol of the earth) which means near to the earth, should promise health, prosperity, and the growth of the family. In a house, the water had to be drained to the east, where “the dragon king” (*longwang* 龍王), the zoomorphic representation of the yang masculine power of generation, dispensed of rain. In this context we can imagine that the placement of the kitchen and toilets was also an important task.

There was a rule: “kitchen east, toilet west” (*dongchu xice* 東廚西廁):

“According to *feng-shui*, the arrangement of the kitchen could influence the health of the entire family. In the Beijing courtyard dwelling, the kitchen could be in the northeast or southwest chamber, either of which was an “evil” chamber in the *feng-shui* model of arranging *Qi* ... However, the air intake of a kitchen wood stove must face one of the favorable orientations.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 276)

“Corresponding to an ‘evil’ chamber in the *feng-shui* model of arranging *Qi*, the dry toilet of a Beijing courtyard house often sat in the front yard’s southwest corner. This location was convenient for cleaning out the waste without causing too much interference with family life. In the past, often before the sun rose, the courtyard’s waste was collected and moved to the countryside to be used as fertilizer. The location of the dry toilet kept the master rooms away from possible smells and flies, but was a disadvantage for the servants’ rooms which were near the dry toilet. The distance between master rooms and the toilet did not really inconvenience the masters, because in bedrooms or the ‘ear room’ they had chamber pots, which were emptied to the dry toilet by servants or wives.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 277)

On the basis of *fengshui* principles, the ancient Chinese wanted to draw a likeness of the harmony of Heaven and Earth in their design of courtyard houses, making them a microcosm of the macrocosm around them. The traditional Chinese family wanted to become larger and stronger by each generation. In order to express this desire and wish Chinese families would plant in their courtyards pomegranate trees, symbolizing fertility, apple trees symbolizing brothers living in harmony. (Cf. Xu Ping, 1998, p. 278)

2.2. Socio-hierarchical Codes in a Chinese Courtyard House

The above-mentioned *fengshui* system (nowadays mostly associated with Daoism) in the context of a Chinese courtyard house was intimately combined with China's strict social and family system (Confucianism). The structure of the Chinese traditional family can be conceived of as "Confucian familism" which in a deeper sense understands a family as the only suitable and adequate locus of nascency, development and cultivation of human feelings, beginning with their instinctive faculties in *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) and *ti* 悌 (brotherly obedience). This does not only imply the Confucian conviction of family as a model for the state which was so criticized by Trauzettel (Trauzettel, 1977, pp. 340–362) with the help of Aristotle (384–322 BC), but also a tendency which seems to have been later extended to international relationships.²

The traditional Chinese family can be characterized by the following six structural traits (Jordan, 2006):

1) patrilineal as a kinship system in which an individual's family membership derives from and is recorded through his or her father's lineage;

2) patriarchal (as a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property);

3) prescriptively virilocal (virilocal/patrilocal residence) as the social system in which a married couple is obliged to reside with the husband's parents (groom's family);

4) embedded in a kinship group, signifying the fact that a Chinese family was always a kinship group. Kinship means the relationship between members of the same family as related genealogically, i.e., either by having common ancestors or by being married. This is the basic indicator of the difference between the insider/outsider status in Chinese culture – family member (*jiaren* 家人) and non-family member (*feijiaren* 非家人) which is followed by the distinction between "one of our blood" (*zijiaren* 自己人) and "stranger in blood" (*wairen* 外人). Thus, there is a difference between a family and a household. A household included all those who lived in the same building or a courtyard house. Such a housing compound could have included servants, tenants, apprentices, and many others who were not part of the family. Of course, the family might also have included some members who were not part of the given

² "The Chinese tributary system was not merely a strategic structure. It was based on an assumption of Chinese superiority, in terms of both power and cultural – even moral – influence. The relationship between the Chinese emperor and the Korean king, for example, can be stated in Confucian terms as an older brother/younger brother relationship, involving obligations of loyalty and obedience on the part of Korea, and obligations of magnanimity and protection on the part of China." (Clark, 1983, p. 78)

household. There were always shorter (in case of, e.g., a peddler as traveling vendor of goods) or longer times of separations (in the army, school education etc.) from the family in China;

5) sharing a common household budget, thus being a common economic. This implied that all possessions, income, expenses, and resource distribution of all family members were managed through the patriarchal authority of the family (with “*pater familias*” at the top), and

6) normatively extended in form, including a descent line of men and their wives and children.

This rigid and hierarchically structured family system, which had been the basis of Chinese society in imperial China for over two thousand years, has been reflected in courtyard house compounds. The grandparents (or sometimes great-grandparents) always lived in the main house (cf. “The General Layout” no. 1 above; the principal house) with the biggest and central courtyard before them. This place was the largest on the central north-south axis (which might have expressed the vertical and most important connection, i.e., father-son relationship in the traditional Chinese family) and protected by one or two, or even more, front courtyards.

“The inaccessibility of the central authority was designed not only for defence, but also as a symbol of his importance and the distance between him and other members of his family. Furthermore, within the major yard, the major rooms where the grandparents lived faced south and were the highest rooms with the most steps ... Regarding orientations, positions, and drainage, the master rooms were considered to have the best *feng-shui* quality in the entire house, while the two wing rooms, symbolizing the worship of the master..., occupied by the father’s or uncle’s families, faced east or west and were lower, with fewer steps. In the past, the master might have concubines, who with their children could occupy the wing rooms. The rooms for servants, who in many cases included daughters-in-law, faced north and were the lowest rooms, located in the narrow front yard along the street. These rooms were considered to have the worst *feng-shui* quality in the entire courtyard. Serving as guards of this social system, *feng-shui* masters often warned people that everybody in a family must follow the *feng-shui* order of the hierarchical room arrangement; otherwise an impending disaster might overcome the entire family.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 278)

The architectural domination of the main house – the principal house, being the largest building in the courtyard compound, was stressed by the rectangle shape on the north-south axis. The strictly symmetrical design of the inner major courtyard gives the impression of family members as though gathered around the main authority of “*pater familias*.” “Physical conditions reinforced culture in the sense that the grandfather was expected to be overbearing and the women

and servants subservient and low.” (Xu Ping, 1998, p. 279) Thus, the architecture of Chinese courtyard houses expressed and mirrored the Confucian understanding of a family, and at the same time such architectural compounds influenced and reinforced the patriarchal and hierarchal life-style and the conviction of the importance of the orderly family as the basis of a harmonious, peaceful, and healthy society. In a traditional Chinese courtyard house, there was no place for so-called individual privacy which is nowadays so valued in the West. There was only a need for family privacy which was essentially guaranteed already by the walls around each Chinese courtyard house. Individual privacy ruled little inside, because maintaining social control within the family was needed in order to keep an eye on the orderly life of each family member.

Concluding Remarks

During the last century – the fall of imperial China in 1911, the rise of Communist China in 1949 with its one-child policy (1979–2015), Chinese family structure has changed from a desired extended family (as a complex corporate organization with the main vertical son-father relationship) to a nuclear family (as a simple conjugal unit with the primary horizontal husband-wife relationship), consisting of parents and children. Such changes demanded new housing designs which led to the decline and sometimes massive demolition of Chinese traditional courtyard houses in Beijing and other Chinese cities. However, there is also a rise in new courtyard housing in China since the end of the 1970s, e.g., in inner Beijing (the Ju’er Hutong 菊兒衚衕 /菊儿胡同: Chrysanthemum Lane New Courtyard Housing Estate) and inner Shouzhou (Tongfangyuan 桐芳苑: Aleurites Cordata Fragrant Garden Housing Estate; south China) which are projects to modernize traditional housing forms. (Zhang, 2017, pp. 40–43; Zhang, 2019, pp. 1–19)

“The findings likewise suggest that communal courtyards foster social interaction and private courtyards facilitate self-cultivation. Residents still regard courtyards/gardens as important spaces for establishing harmony with their neighbors and with themselves. Nevertheless, neighborly relations are only partly influenced by the form and space of the courtyard housing, and are perhaps influenced even more so by a changing and polarizing society, socio-economic differences, housing tenure, modern lifestyles, community involvement, common language, cultural awareness, and the cultural background of the residents ...

The findings also show that the communal courtyards help sustain some traditional Chinese cultural activities. The primary function of a communal courtyard is to maintain health/natural healing. However, many cultural activities

are much less or no longer partaken of in the communal courtyards, likely due to such factors as time, climate, courtyard ownership, yard size, facilities, and so on.” (Zhang, 2017, p. 42)

The overall results indicate that these new courtyard housing projects are culturally sustainable only to various degrees in different social contexts; Chinese architects are still on the search for a way how to make old things new again. They attempt to build new courtyard housing compounds which can again satisfy the Chinese soul and her quest for harmony – this time not predominantly within one’s own family, but directly in neighborly relations, which are only in part influenced by the form and space of the courtyard house compounds and to a greater degree by an ever faster changing Chinese society, present-day socio-economic differentiation, modern lifestyles, and the cultural background of the residents.

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Dom na dziedzińcu – *siheyuan* 四合院 jako miejsce zamieszkania tradycyjnej chińskiej rodziny

Streszczenie: Chiński dom na dziedzińcu, zwany po chińsku *siheyuan*, wyposażony w jedno wejście i jeden lub więcej otwartych dziedzińców obejmujących jednopiętrowe budynki, reprezentuje tradycyjny dom mieszkalny w Chinach. W całej historii Chin mieszkanie na dziedzińcu było podstawowym wzorem architektonicznym stosowanym do budowania rządowych (pałaców i biur) i rodzinnych rezydencji oraz obiektów religijnych (świątyń i klasztorów). W tym krótkim artykule autor przedstawia standardowy tradycyjny dworek w Pekinie z dynastii Ming (1368–1644), który jest przygotowany do zamieszkania przez rodzinę złożoną z trzech i czterech pokoleń. Budowa fizyczna i struktura przestrzenna tradycyjnego chińskiego domu na dziedzińcu są głęboko zakorzenione w starożytnej chińskiej myśli filozoficznej. Chińczycy zastosowali zasady *fengshui* (wiatr i woda), aby zharmonizować się ze swoim środowiskiem oraz zapewnić dobrobyt, długowieczność i błogosławieństwo rodzinie. Z punktu widzenia *fengshui* podstawowy dom na dziedzińcu był nie tylko miejscem zamieszkania, ale także reprezentował ustrukturyzowaną i skomplikowaną wizję kosmosu, który powinien funkcjonować jako idealny pojemnik *qi* (energii życiowej). Podstawowa oś północ-południe, która rytmicznie i nieprzerwanie gwarantuje vitalny przepływ *qi* i kwadratowy kształt domu na dziedzińcu, który oznacza blisko ziemi, powinna zapewnić zdrowie, dobrobyt i rozwój rodziny. System *fengshui* (obecnie kojarzony głównie z daoizmem) w kontekście chińskiego domu na dziedzińcu został ściśle połączony z surowym systemem społecznym i rodzinnym Chin (konfucjanizm). Struktura chińskiej tradycyjnej rodziny – autor nazywa ją „konfucjańskim familizmem” – oznacza konfucjańskie przekonanie o rodzinie jako modelu dla całego państwa. Ten sztywny i zhierarchizowany system rodzinny, który był podstawą chińskiego społeczeństwa w imperialnych Chinach przez ponad dwa tysiące lat, znalazł odzwierciedlenie w architekturze domów na dziedzińcu.

Autor artykułu podkreśla wysiłek współczesnych architektów, którzy starają się znaleźć sposób na ożywienie tradycyjnych budynków na dziedzińcu w obecnych czasach.

Słowa kluczowe: chińska architektura, chiński dom na dziedzińcu, tradycyjna chińska rodzina.

