

Quotation, Architecture and Chinese Ancestor Worship

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Abstract

Previous studies have expanded Nelson Goodman's definition of 'quotation' by demonstrating that quotations also exist in architecture and physical buildings. This study investigates the complex and diverse forms of quotations in premodern Chinese architecture together with their fundamental effect on the culture of ancestor worship. The study suggests that the practice of admiring the past cemented the notion that the best times for humans may not always lie ahead but rather can be found in a bygone age. As a result, veneration of the past became commonplace in premodern China. By tracing the etymology and semantic changes of the Chinese term for 'ancestry', this study explores this long-established preoccupation of Chinese culture. It was believed that ancestor worship largely relied on architecture to provide a physical embodiment of ancestry. The pictographic shapes of ancient Chinese characters reflect how the practice originated in society and was dynamically perpetuated. The use of tanghao is noteworthy. A tanghao was usually inscribed in calligraphy on a board hung horizontally above the door of the main hall of a premodern Chinese courtyard. The term 'tanghao' literally means 'name of the hall'. In architectural terms, the main hall represented the most distinguished area in the spatial hierarchy of a traditional Chinese courtyard. In everyday life, a tanghao was used as a title to designate a specific clan. The study proceeds to explain that many tanghao referred to illustrious clan ancestors or to the birthplace of the family. The interaction between quotations in architectural practice and the culture of ancestor worship provides insight into how architecture engaged with society and how a concept can be propagated through architecture.

Introduction

A quotation is commonly understood as a group of words taken from a text or speech and repeated by someone other than the original author or speaker.¹ Based on the question “If a string of words can quote another string of words, can a picture quote a picture, or a symphony quote another symphony?” Nelson Goodman presented the broader concept of verbal, pictorial and musical quotations.² One may also ask whether buildings can quote other buildings. Indeed, buildings may contain other buildings; for example, the Pergamon Museum contains the Pergamon Altar. Buildings can also contain parts of other buildings; for example, the Cloisters Museum in New York contains cloisters, columns and porticoes from other buildings. It is argued that building quotations do exist.³

A quotation in architecture may go beyond the relationship between buildings. It can be explored in the tangible and the intangible and in and beyond a physical form. In premodern China, architecture per se seemed to serve as a way of quoting history by recalling the ubiquitous importance of the past. With a focus on the interaction between premodern Chinese architecture and the particular sense of the past contextualised in premodern Chinese society, this essay attempts to reveal the complex and diverse ways in which architecture quotes the past. The premodern Chinese sense of the past was inevitably associated with its deep-seated belief in ancestor worship as well as the culture of filial piety. Embedded in this context, premodern Chinese architecture cemented a profound sense of looking back to the past.

Beyond a simple remembrance of the past or nostalgia, references to the distant past in architecture can be meaningful. In *On Adam's House in Paradise*, Joseph Rykwert walks readers through the history of interest in primitive huts. This primitive form of architecture is quoted directly or indirectly as a point of reference.⁴ For Rykwert, the distant past that is continuously quoted is a reference that represents the essentials of building. Robert Maxwell interprets the past as the commonplace where imperfection is acceptable. In contrast to the longing for the new or for a bright future, the commonplace offers consolation and the strength necessary to endure.⁵

Extending the idea of historical materialism, this study suggests that the relationship between ancestors and descendants to some extent determined how people viewed the past. A family house, as a material vessel of the intergenerational relationships within a family, played a profound role in maintaining the view of the past. Through an investigation of early literary works, this study begins by tracing the ancient meaning and early pictographic shapes of the Chinese characters for “ancestor”. Two categories of literature are the focus of the study: annotated books and texts in which the word “ancestor” is used. A great deal of ancient historical literature shows that there were multiple layers of meanings underlying these Chinese characters. This paper suggests that there were three primary meanings: previous generations or ancestors, the origin or a widely applied reference point, and sacred architecture. The sanctity of architecture was a component of the concept of an ancestor. Based on fieldwork and case studies, it can be seen that architecture became an indispensable agent for the tangible embodiment of ancestry. Quotations from ancestors were used to represent the most distinguished space in a premodern Chinese courtyard, the main hall. The name of the hall was usually an honourable quotation from a respected ancestor. This title was not only used as the title of a family tree book but was also inscribed on a board and hung above the door of the main hall. The main hall was used to worship ancestors as well as to pray for an expected future. Thus, a vision of the future was based on a view of the past.

The way of imagining the future based on a view of the past in premodern Chinese culture was profoundly maintained by its architecture. The sanctity of architecture was attached to the past instead of to an unknown future. The past represented the origin. Domestic buildings not only provided shelter for a family but also served as a long-enduring physical reminder that referring to the original point of departure provides a better understanding of where to go. It is easy to forget the original point of departure during the customary daily routine. It is also easy to mistake the pursuit of

the future as the process of escaping from the past. Looking back may imply rethinking customary practices and reconsidering the direction ahead. This potency of architectural meaning deserves more attention, especially when a new way of life and renewed building forms are often portrayed as indispensable for a rosy future. Expecting a future full of new experiences may stimulate a feeling of excitement and boost the sale of products associated with this portrayed future. This effect may be triggered by the powerful influence of advertising that depicts the portrayed future. With the commercialisation of the future, cognitive inertia is formed. People gradually become used to associating the future with a new life that is different from the present. This perspective on the future has become a routine of modern life. Therefore, it is important to recall a way of imagining the future based on looking back.

Multiple Meanings of the Concept of Ancestry

The sense of the past in imperial Chinese society was indispensably connected with the profound concept of ancestry. In Chinese, the word “ancestor” is *zuzong* 祖宗. In this word, the first character, *zu* 祖, refers to generations before the father. *Zong* 宗 means ancestors and clan. This study notes that these two characters have rich, ancient meanings. Historical literature shows that there were three primary layers of meaning integrated in the concept of ancestors. These three layers of meanings shed light on some initially connected and even interchangeable conceptions.

Approximately two thousand years ago, during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), one definition of *zu* 祖 was “temple,” especially the temple for worshipping ancestors.⁶ Long before this definition was offered, near the end of the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), there was an important regulation concerning the planning of an imperial city in *Kao Gong Ji* 考工记 (The Records of the Examination of a Craftsman, first published around 475–221 BCE): ‘左祖右社’⁷ (the temple for worshipping ancestors should be located on the left, and the altar for worshipping the sky and earth should be arranged on the right). In the text of this regulation, “ancestor” denoted “temple”. Zheng Xuan 郑玄 annotated the word and confirmed that *zu* 祖 represented ‘temple’, especially a temple for ancestor worship.⁸

Apart from the meanings of “ancestor,” and “a type of sacred architecture,” *zu* showed a hybrid sense of time and referred to an origin. A premodern Chinese dictionary and subsequent annotations offer valuable traditional information. *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (Explaining and Analysing Chinese Text and Characters) was written between 100 and 121 CE and was the first comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters. Duan Yucai 段玉裁, the Qing dynasty scholar, was an expert in exegetical studies of Chinese characters and conducted substantial linguistic research in ancient Chinese. The quality of Duan’s annotations, which are based on *Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters*, stands out as one of the most cited references in research today. Duan further annotated *Shuowen jiezi* and emphasised that the character *zu* had two meanings. *Zu* initially meant “temple,” and referred to “origin”.⁹ *Shigu* 释诂 (The Annotation of Ancient Literature) confirms these two meanings of *zu*.

After enquiring into the ancient meaning of the first character in the Chinese word for ancestor, *zuzong* 祖宗 (ancestor), the study now moves to the second character, *zong* 宗. It seems that *zong* had an even stronger connection to the sanctity of architecture, especially as reflected by the ancient graphic form of this character. As a pictographic symbol, *zong* consisted of two parts: a building and a kneeling person. The ancient form of 宗 was ‘’, which was a combination of ‘’ and ‘’. ‘’ represented a building with a pitched roof, and ‘’ symbolised a kneeling person. Such an essential association was further confirmed in the subsequent literature. Wang Fuli noted that 宗 was the temple for worshipping and showing respect towards ancestors. ‘宗，尊祖廟也。从宀从示’¹⁰ (the

meaning followed from ‘宀’ and ‘示’). The shape of the character ‘宗’ evolved into ‘宗’ and ‘宗’ was transformed into ‘宗’.¹¹ Ban Gu 班固, a scholar of the Han dynasty, clarified the meaning of ‘宗’ and underscored a reverential attitude towards ancestors in *Baihu tong* 白虎通 (Virtuous Discussions in White Tiger Hall, first published in approximately 25–220 CE).¹²

Ancient literary works reveal that *zong* was directly used as a noun to represent a temple. In *The Classics of Poetry*, a collection of poems composed between the eleventh and the seventh century BCE, there is a poem titled *Fuyi* 凫鷖 (Wild Ducks and Waterfowl) that describes a pleasant banquet arranged by the Emperor of the Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) to honour the clergy who assisted in a rite of ancestor worship. The poem states that

‘凫鷖在渚，公尸来燕来宗。既燕于宗，福祿攸降’¹³ A flock of ducks and waterfowl were floating in a winding stream, happily playing in the water. The respectful clergy performed the ritual as the holy soul entered the *zong* 宗 to attend the banquet that was elaborately arranged by the Emperor. After feasting at the *zong*, fortune and fame would follow.

In the original text, the word “*zong*” was used twice, after a transitive verb, *lai* (enter or come into), and with the preposition *yu* (at or in). Therefore, in this context, *zong* was used as an object expressing a place. It did not mean “ancestor” in this context but rather referred to a temple. For another example, in *Zhou Li* 周礼 (The Rites of Zhou), *zong* was used in a similar way to explain how to pray at a temple before sending an army to battle: ‘凡师甸用牲于社宗，则为位’¹⁴ (memorial tables should be set at a temple and sacrificial animals should be offered).

In contrast, the architectural term was also used to mean “ancestor”. *Miao* 庙 is an architectural term referring to a temple. In the premodern Chinese dictionary, *zu* (ancestor) was used directly to explain *miao*.¹⁵ This linguistic phenomenon was apparent in the case of a more specific architectural term, *zongmiao* 宗庙 (a temple for ancestors). *Zhanguo ce* 战国策 (Strategies of the Warring States, first published between 206 BCE and 9 CE) recorded a story that occurred during the Warring States period. The local feudal prince of the Qi state exiled an important official, Meng Changjun 孟尝君, but after some time, the prince regretted the decision and apologised to Meng. The feudal prince said repentantly that

寡人不祥，被于宗庙之祟，沉于谄谀之臣，开罪于君。寡人不足为也；愿君顾先王之宗庙，姑反国统万人乎！¹⁶ I had bad luck and suffered from the punishment imposed by the ancestors (*zongmiao* 宗庙).¹⁷ I was hoodwinked by some calumnies created by other officials so that I blamed you, which turned out to be a serious mistake. I wish you could forgive me. For the sake of the ancestors (*zongmiao* 宗庙)¹⁸ and the previous monarch, could you please come back and help me? Let us manage our country and government together!

In this story, the word *zongmiao* 宗庙 (a temple for worshipping ancestors) appeared three times and reflected the intertwined concepts of ancestors and a temple for the ancestors. In the first two instances, this architectural term was used to refer to ancestors. The third instance was in Meng Changjun’s reply. Meng received the prince’s apology and agreed to return to the Qi State but requested that the prince build a splendid temple as a sign of their agreement.¹⁹

As *zu* does, beyond the combined meanings of ancestor and architecture, *zong* also suggests the concept of an origin. Xing Bing 邢昺, a scholar from the Northern Song dynasty, concluded that ‘宗者，本也’ (*zong* means origin). Then, he continued to explain its use in detail and the distinction

between *zu* and *zong* when they were used to refer to a temple. The level of *zu* was higher than that of *zong*.²⁰ Overall, the complex history of linguistic relationships shows that the concepts of architecture, ancestors and origins were profoundly associated with one another in premodern Chinese culture.

The Name of the Hall and the Domestic Sphere

The multiple meanings of the concept of ancestry show that ancestors, origins and sacred architecture were integrated. There are some phenomena that further indicate how these concepts were integrated in premodern Chinese architecture. After the linguistic exploration, this study continues to enquire into these complex relationships to see how these conceptual connections influenced the real world, especially their impact on architecture in day-to-day domestic life. This section focuses on the important space called the hall in a Chinese courtyard house. The name of the hall and its use shed light on how the view of the past was maintained through interactions between inhabitants and their houses.

The Chinese courtyard house, also known as the *siheyuan*, was a dominant type of residence in premodern China. Buildings were built on four sides of a central courtyard, forming a square or rectangle. Within a Chinese courtyard house, the spaces were classified in a hierarchy. The hall was the nucleus of the premodern Chinese family house. Typically, the premodern Chinese courtyard house contained three types of space: the *ting* 庭 (courtyard), the *tang* 堂 (hall) and the *shi* 室 (inner room). They played different roles and each had a different status in the domestic space hierarchy.

The hall ranked highest culturally and was embodied in physical buildings through its meaningful placement. The hall was distinguished from the courtyard by its height and appeared to be more dominant than the inner room. The hall was elevated by a platform and stairs. ‘堂下谓之庭’²¹ (the area downstairs was called the courtyard). The *shi* (inner room) was deeper inside and was the more private part of the house. Usually, only family members or very close friends were allowed to enter; therefore, Confucius used the profound difference between *tang* (hall) and *shi* (inner room) to explain a stage in which one had knowledge of something but had not yet obtained in-depth understanding. Such a condition was depicted figuratively as an individual who had stepped up into the hall but had not yet entered the inner room.²² The main hall was a special domestic space that was not for living but for negotiating affairs and conducting meetings and rites.

Tanghao 堂号 literally means “the name of the hall”. This word is a combination of two characters: *tang* (hall) and *hao* (name, symbol or code). At the same time, it was also the title of a family or clan.²³ In practice, the popular convention was that the family would inscribe its *tanghao* in large characters on a board and hang it above the door to the hall. The use of *tanghao* was especially popular in the Qing dynasty. *Tanghao* often appeared in the form ‘XX *tang*’ (‘XX hall’). The notebook used to record the family tree of a clan was usually called “The Family Tree of XX *Tang* with the Family Name,” for example, *Ziyang Tang Zhu Shi Zongpu* 紫阳堂朱氏宗谱 (The Family Tree of the Ziyang Hall of the Zhus). Both orally and in writing, ‘XX hall’ represented a family or clan.

The meaning of the *tanghao* (name of the hall) can be further explored by gaining insight into how a *tanghao* was generated. Usually used by prestigious families, a *tanghao* can be thought of as quotations from the family’s ancestors. There were four main types of quotation. The first was an ancestor’s words. For example, *Sizhi Tang* (Four Know Hall) was the *tanghao* of the Yangs because Yang Zhen, an ancestor of the family, persuaded his friends that they should never do anything against their conscience because “The god in paradise will know. The god in the earth will know. You and I know. All four know”.²⁴ The second was an ancestor’s written words. The third was the name of the place where the family’s ancestors came from, for example, *Taiyuan Tang* 太原堂 (Taiyuan Hall) for a family whose ancestors came from Taiyuan and *Longxi Tang* 陇西堂 (Longxi Hall) for the Li family, whose ancestors came from Long Xi.²⁵ The fourth was from a story about an ancestor, such

as *Sankui Tang* of the Wangs. The clan whose family name was Wang assigned themselves the *tanghao Sankui Tang* 三槐堂 (Hall of Three Chinese Scholar Trees).²⁶ *The History of the Song Dynasty* records that a scholar named Wang You 王祐, who was a literate man, had his own way of educating his sons. Once, he planted three Chinese scholar trees by himself and said, “among my descendants there should be three outstanding young men such as these three Chinese scholar trees”.²⁷ After growing up, his sons all behaved very well, especially Wang Dan 王旦, who was placed in a senior position, equivalent to a modern prime minister, in the government of the Song dynasty. Therefore, this honourable history was included when the clan called itself the Hall of Three Chinese Scholar Trees and expected the descendants to be successful and have bright futures as Wang You’s sons did.

The name of the hall acted as a link between the clan and its ancestors, connecting family tradition with hopes for the future. The illustrious merits of clan ancestors or the birthplace of the family was inscribed in calligraphy on a large horizontal board, which was hung above the door of the main hall. This tangible reminder implied the justification of the past in the inhabitants’ day-to-day life. Rather than portraying an imagined future, the expectation for future generations was expressed indirectly by praising the past.

Conclusion

This study investigated the complex ways in which architecture acted as an agent cementing the veneration of the past in premodern China. Whether to look back to the past can be a perennial dilemma in architecture. This dilemma has also been noted in the observations of Joseph Rykwert, Walter Benjamin and others.²⁸ This paper suggests that architecture per se was a way of quoting the past. The multiple meanings underlying the word ‘ancestor’ in ancient Chinese show that architecture was associated with veneration of the past. The role that architecture played in cementing this veneration was manifested in various ways.

Architecture existed as an antidote to the ambivalence of looking back. The past was quoted in architecture and embodied in a tangible physical form in buildings. What was quoted from the past was usually not a complete history but a history filtered by the collective memory. The chosen quotation was of profound significance for inhabitants and referred to the origin as well as a vision of the future.

The multi-layered concept of ancestry in ancient Chinese was intertwined with the meaning of the origin. An origin could always be referred to, not only during major rituals but also in day-to-day life. The view towards the origin penetrated the method of naming the hall of the premodern Chinese courtyard. Returning to the origin evokes a re-examination of current practice and guides the vision of the future. Referring to the original point of departure is a way to clearly see where we came from and where we shall go. The architecture of a family recorded what the family valued by quoting the past. For the living and for future generations, the house provided a timeless reminder of this return to the origin to envision daily practices.

The expectations for the future could be diverse and full of imagination, but not rootless. The meaning of the Chinese characters indicated that the sanctity of architecture was measured by whether it emerged as a token of the past, the origin. This role of architecture was highly valued. To provide an aperture for looking back was an essential consolation offered by premodern Chinese architecture. Perhaps this is also a deep-seated role of the nature of architecture.

Endnotes

- ¹ Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ² Nelson Goodman, "On Some Questions Concerning Quotation," *The Monist* 58, no. 2 (1974): 294-306.
- ³ Remei Capdevila-Werning, "Can Buildings Quote?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 1 (2011): 115-24.
- ⁴ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History 2* (Museum of Modern Art; distributed by New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Conn, 1972).
- ⁵ Robert Maxwell, "The Two-way Stretch: Between Past and Future," *The Journal of Architecture* 2, no. 1 (1997): 1-10.
- ⁶ '祖, 始廟也' from Xu, Shen 许慎, *Shuowen jiezi 说文解字 [Explaining and analysing Chinese text and characters]*.
- ⁷ Wen, Renjun 闻人军, *Kao gong ji 考工记 [The records of examination of craftsman]* (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), 112.
- ⁸ Zhen Xuan states, "Ancestor here means a type of temple for the worship of ancestors" from Ye, Shuxian 叶舒宪, "Yurenxiang, yubingxingqi yu zulingpaiwei 玉人像, 玉柄形器与祖灵牌位 [Jade portrait, jade handle-shaped artefact and spirit tablets of the ancestors]," *Minzu Yishu 民族艺术 [National Arts]*, no. 3 (2013).
- ⁹ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhushu 说文解字注 [Explaining and analysing Chinese text and characters annotated by Duan]* (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1815).
- ¹⁰ Wang, FuLi 王福利, "Fangzhongyue youwu 'jinshi' qi shiyong wenti xinlun 房中乐有无 '金石' 器使用问题新论 [A new theory about the use of stone instruments in Fangzhong royal music]," *Art of Music* 3 (2008): 105-12.
- ¹¹ Gu, Yangui 谷衍奎, *Hanzi yuanliu zidian 汉字源流字典 [Dictionary of the origin of Chinese characters]* (Yuwen chubanshe, 2008), 399.
- ¹² Ban, Gu 班固, *Baihu Tong 白虎通* (Beijing tushu chubanshe, 2006).
- ¹³ *Fuyi*(鳧鷖) in Chapter of *Daya*(大雅) from *Shijing (The She King) 诗经 [The classics of poetry]* (11c.–6c. BCE).
- ¹⁴ Qian, Xuan 钱玄, *Zhou li 周礼 [The rites of Zhou]* (Yuelu shuyuan, 2001), 189.
- ¹⁵ Duan, Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhushu 说文解字注 [Explaining and analysing Chinese text and characters annotated by Duan]*.
- ¹⁶ Wang, Shouqian 王守谦, *Zhanguo ce quanshi 战国策全译 [Strategies of the Warring States with annotation]* (Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1992), 300.
- ¹⁷ "The temple" was used here to represent "ancestors".
- ¹⁸ "The temple" was used here to represent "ancestors".
- ¹⁹ "The temple" was used here to represent "ancestors".
- ²⁰ Xing Bing annotated a chapter, *Sangfu Xiaoji 丧服小记 [On Mourning Apparel]*, of *Li ji 礼记 [The Book of Rites]*. *Li ji* clarified '庙号不迁, 最尊者祖, 次曰宗, 通称曰宗庙。又流派所出为宗' in Zhang, Guoshuo 张国硕, Chen, Chaoyun 陈朝云 and Wang, Baoguo 王保国, *Zhongguo gudai wenming tansuo 中国古代文明探索 [The exploration of the Chinese ancient civilization]* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2006); Li, Xiangping 李向平, *Wang Quan yu Shenquan 王权与神权 [Throne and Theocracy]* (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991).
- ²¹ Huang, Linggeng 黄灵庚, *Chuci zhangju shuzheng 楚辞章句疏证 [Verses of Chu with annotations]* 4 (Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 83.
- ²² Li, Xueqin 李学勤, *Lunyu zhushu 论语注疏 [The analects of Confucius and annotations]* (Taiwan guji chuban youxian gongsi, 2001), 166.
- ²³ Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Yuyan Yanjiusuo Cidian Bianjishi 中国社会科学院语言研究所词典编辑室 [The Dictionary Department of the CASS Institute of Linguistics], *Xiandai hanyu cidian 现代汉语词典 [Modern Chinese dictionary]*.
- ²⁴ *Yang Zhen zhuan [The biography of Yang Zhen]* in Ye 范曄 Fan, *Hou Han shu 后汉书 [Book of the later Han]* (398–445 CE), vol. 54.
- ²⁵ Both "Taiyuan," and "Longxi" are the names of places.
- ²⁶ Another name for a Chinese scholar tree is *Styphnolobium japonicum*.

²⁷ *The Biography of Wang Dan* from Tuo Tuo 脱脱 and A Lutu 阿鲁图, *Song Shi* 宋史 [History of Song].

²⁸ Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*. Also, as Walter Benjamin explained in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," (1969), "The angel [Angelus Novus] would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them,..". Additionally, see Claude Perrault, *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des anciens* (Chez Jean Baptiste Coignard, 1979).