



The Architectural Space Art Characteristics of Foshan Academies

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Foshan academies in China are carriers of historical culture, reflecting the academic and cultural development of the region. This study investigates the architectural space of traditional Foshan academies from a design perspective. The research aims to classify and analyze existing resources and types, explore the artistic characteristics of architectural space, and uncover the cultural core and spirit of Foshan academies to provide a scientific basis for their modern inheritance.

Materials and Methods: Field research was conducted on 27 academies selected for their integrity and representativeness. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used, integrating interdisciplinary methods from design, folklore, architecture, and cultural geography.

Results: The distribution and site selection of Foshan academies are influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The architectural layout centers on atria, with lecture halls, libraries, and sacrificial spaces arranged in a strict axisymmetric sequence, reflecting a cultural concept of step-by-step progression. The academies exhibit a distinct Lingnan architectural style with decorative art featuring three carvings, two sculptures, and one painting, blending local cultural aesthetics and practical climate adaptations. The cultural core of the academies represents a unique blend of Confucian rites and music, a commitment to upholding the Tao, and the integration of Chinese and Western influences.

Conclusion: The artistic characteristics of Foshan academies showcase a blend of Central Plains, Lingnan, and overseas cultures. The research highlights the need for deeper exploration of the evolution, artistic features, and cultural connotations to support the modern inheritance and development of academic culture.

Keywords: Foshan; Traditional Academies; Architectural Space; Artistic Characteristics; Modern Inheritance

Introduction

Following the establishment of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations in 2003 (UNESCO, 2003), the restoration and protection of cultural heritage, particularly academic culture, have achieved widespread consensus among nations (ICOMOS, 2008). This international agreement underscores the role of cultural heritage in forging national bonds and provides a pivotal opportunity for the continuation and revitalization of regional cultural legacies. In 2013, the inauguration of Guangfu Culture Academy Street in Guangzhou exemplified successful efforts in the excavation and contemporary revival of the artistic characteristics of the Foshan academies, setting a precedent for similar initiatives (Chen & Cheng, 2022).

Academies, originating in the Tang Dynasty, serve as fundamental spaces for the dissemination and creation of culture across China. They function as centers for scholarly training and symbols of local culture (Liu, 1939). A significant transformation occurred in 1898 when the Qing government, under imperial orders, mandated that all provinces, prefectures, departments, counties, and townships convert their academies into schools. This transformation was largely completed by 1905 with the abolition of the imperial examination system, leading to the gradual replacement of academies by new-style schools across the nation (Tian, 2017). Consequently, most Foshan academies were either repurposed into new-style schools, ancestral halls, or other uses, with some being forced to close or destroyed.

Reflecting on the evolution of Foshan Academies, it is evident that the culture fostered by these traditional institutions through various periods has not only survived but has also evolved, encapsulating the spirit of the academy and broader cultural dynamics. These institutions have emphasized independence, a synergy between teaching and research, academic freedom, and strong moral and teacher-student relationships. Throughout their evolution, the academy spirits and the broader academy culture have





continuously adapted, incorporating new meanings and sustaining vitality through development and inheritance processes. The value orientation of traditional academy spirits, advocating for a synthesis of ethical values and knowledge pursuit, aligns well with modern educational philosophies that emphasize a people-oriented approach.

Despite ongoing challenges such as cultural impacts, structural damage, and diminishing sizes, the educational missions of prominent academies persist. Under government initiatives, traditional academy culture has once again attracted societal and academic attention. New academies and cultural institutions are being established, marking a revival and development phase focused on inheriting and evolving the unique artistic characteristics of academy architectural spaces.

This study, from a design perspective, examines the architectural layouts, resources, and types of the Foshan Academies, employing interdisciplinary methods. A comprehensive survey of the architectural spaces of these academies is conducted to analyze the artistic characteristics of their varied functional spaces, aiming to preserve and interpret the historical context of Foshan academies effectively.

Objectives

1. To classify and study existing resources and types of the Foshan academies.
2. To explore the architectural space art characteristics of the Foshan academies;
3. To excavate the spirit of the Foshan academies and the cultural core of the academies.

Literature Review

Research indicates that studies on Chinese academies began early, with foundational work on the Guangdong academy system emerging in the early 20th century (Liu, 1939). From 1980 to 2022, research on academies in China reached its peak, expanding from topics such as academy literature, education, and systems to include architectural characteristics and their connections with local societies (Wang, 2011). During this period, the establishment of research institutions, the deepening of original topics, and international academic exchanges facilitated a broader understanding of academies (Lowenthal, 2015). In the Lingnan region, academy architecture reflects unique regional cultural and historical traditions, further solidifying the significance of academies in cultural education (Liu, 2013).

In recent years, the focus of academic research in China has shifted to the protection and utilization of space, especially in the maintenance and restoration of spatial elements. Studies suggest that maintaining spatial heritage helps preserve cultural values and fosters community cultural cohesion (Gregson et al., 2009). For instance, the preservation and adaptive reuse of Lingnan academies emphasize not only the restoration of architectural decoration but also the cultural adaptability and multifunctionality of the structures (Zhong, 2022).

Internationally, countries such as South Korea, Japan, and the United States have made significant contributions to academic research. Studies reveal that South Korea adopted Chinese academy culture and developed a distinctive academy system tailored to its educational and cultural context (Lowenthal, 2015). Japanese scholars have analyzed the architectural and educational influences of Chinese academies, particularly the impact of Lingnan culture on layout and decorative styles (Liu, 2013). Western scholars, on the other hand, have explored multiple dimensions of Chinese academies, including their history, social ideologies, and comparisons with contemporary Western educational systems, shedding light on the diversity of academy culture across social and policy dimensions (Lowenthal, 2015).

A review of domestic and international literature reveals that current research on Foshan academies mainly addresses the renovation and reuse of internal spaces (Zhong, 2022), as well as the protection and restoration of architectural decoration and landscape environments (Liu, 2013). However, studies focusing on the artistic characteristics, cultural values, and the integration of these elements into modern development remain limited, highlighting the need for further exploration in these areas.



Conceptual Framework

This paper takes the architectural space of the Foshan academies as the research object, classifies and studies the resource situation, type situation, architectural space characteristics, space decoration, and space furnishings of traditional academies, and excavates the spatial artistic characteristics of the evolution process of the architectural space of the Foshan academies. Through two-dimensional analysis on the time and space, and by using means such as spatial geographic information visualization, the architectural space distribution of the Foshan academies is visualized, the artistic characteristics of the Foshan academies are explored, and the spirits of the Foshan academies and the cultural core of academies are excavated to provide a scientific basis for the modern inheritance of the architectural space of traditional academies.

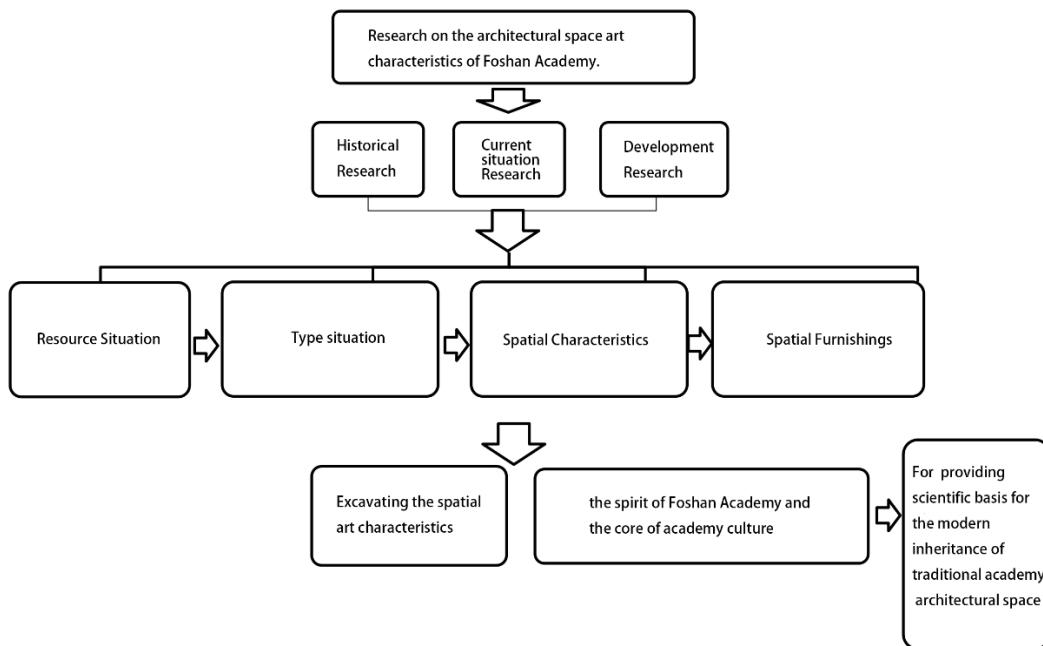


Figure 1 Cat Home Products Literature Collection Process

Note: Constructed by the author

Methodology

1. Research methods

1.1 The interdisciplinary analysis method. Starting from the perspective of design, and at the same time combining multidisciplinary theories such as folklore, architecture, and cultural geography, the spatial artistic characteristics of the Foshan academies and the folk culture and academy spirits they contain are explored.

1.2 Field research. Data collection and collation are conducted to provide data support for the artistic characteristics and quantity changes of the architectural space of the Foshan academies during the development process.

2. Data sources of the Foshan academies

The data sources of the Foshan academies mainly come from field research. The data of 27 academies after screening are as follows:

Table 1 Introduction table of some traditional academies in Foshan.

No.	Name	Location	Specific information
1	Wenchang Academy	Chánchéng District	Built in 1642 (the fifteenth year of Chongzhen in the Ming Dynasty) by Li Zhongding, a minister.
2	Lianfeng Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1718 (the fifty-seventh year of Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty) by the county magistrate.
3	Foshan Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1802 (the seventh year of Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty), relocated and built by Yang Kai, the assistant magistrate. After being destroyed.
4	Yungu Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1517 (the twelfth year of Zhengde in the Ming Dynasty) by Zhan Ruoshui..
5	Shiquan Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1517 (the twelfth year of Zhengde in the Ming Dynasty) by Fang Xianfu.
6	Dake Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1519 (the fourteenth year of Zhengde in the Ming Dynasty) by Zhan Ruoshui.
7	Sifeng Academy	Nanhai Xiqiao Mountain	The academy was built in 1523 (the second year of Jiajing in the Ming Dynasty) by Huo Tao.
8	Sanhu Academy	Nanhai District	Built in 1789 (the fifty-fourth year of Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty) by Cen Huajin.
9	Yang'e Academy	Shunde District	Built during the Chunyou period of the Song Dynasty by Lu Cang.
10	Rongshan Academy	Shunde District	Built in 1808 (the thirteenth year of Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty) by villagers.
11	Tuizhai Academy	Gaoming District	Built during the Shaoxing period of the Song Dynasty.
12	Aoyun Academy	Gaoming District	Built in 1809 (the fourteenth year of Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty), it was funded by Genglou and Heshui townships.
13	Fengang Academy	Sanshui District	Built in 1628 (the first year of Chongzhen in the Ming Dynasty) by Jiang Xianqi, the magistrate of Sanshui County.
14	Shiping Academy	Chancheng District	It is laid out in two bays. Its historical site is currently located on Shiping Avenue, Chancheng District.
15	Qingli Academy	Shunde	Built in the late Qing Dynasty. After reconstruction.
16	Dengshi Academy	Nanhai shishan yinggang	Built in the late Yuan Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty by the Deng family.
17	Shitou Academy	Shiwan District	Built in 1525 (the fourth year of Jiajing in the Ming Dynasty) by the Huo family. At present.
18	Huichuan Family School	Nanhai Xiqiao Mountain	Built in 1877 (the third year of Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty), it was built by the ancestors of Fuyuan,r.
19	Santang Academy	Nanhai District	Built in the middle period of the Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty.
20	Yonghe Academy	Shunde District	Built in 1922, it was built by the people of the Li clan..
21	Xiancha Academy	Chancheng District	Built in 1144 (the fourteenth year of Shaoxing in the Southern Song Dynasty).



No.	Name	Location	Specific information
22	Yongxin Community School	Chancheng District	Built in 1521.
23	Qingyun Academy	Chancheng District	Built during the period of the Republic of China.
24	Dongzhou Academy	Gaoming District	Built in 1891. After renovation, it is the Party School Committee.
25	Pengshan Academy	Gaoming District	Built between 1563 and 1620 (the forty-eighth year of Jiajing in the Ming Dynasty), it was built by Ou Dalun and his followers.
26	Luoyang Academy	Gaoming District	Built in the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, it was built by Ou Dalun.
27	Xionggong Academy	Gaoming District	Built in the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, it was built by Xiong Deyang, the county magistrate.

As shown in the introduction table of some traditional academies in Foshan, most of the existing traditional academies in Foshan are relics of the Qing Dynasty or the Republic of China. Most of the preserved academies have been rebuilt into educational function buildings such as modern schools, place name units, cultural relic remains, cultural relic protection units, museums, red culture education bases, and cultural research institutes, among which cultural relic remains and schools are the majority.

2.1 Learning types of the Foshan academies

Traditional academies in Foshan can be divided into four categories, namely examination-oriented academies, Neo-Confucianism academies, clan ancestral hall academies, and Sinology academies. (As shown in Table 2)

Table 2 Table of Foshan Academy Types

Academy type	Academy Nature	Academy Learning Type	Representative Academy
Examination-oriented Academy	officially-run	Study of stereotyped writing	Lianfeng Academy, Chancheng District, Foshan City.
Ancestral Hall Academy	non-officially-run	Learning and education	Liang's Ancestral Temple, Shunde District, Foshan City
Sinology Academy	officially-run	Study and research on Sinology	Shitou Academy, Shiwan District, Foshan City.

2.2 Level and type of Foshan academies

According to the level and type of academies, there are five types, including the provincial level, the prefectural and county level, the private family level, the privately-run rural level, and the Chinese-Western combination level. (As shown in Table 3)

Table 3 Table of level and type of academies in Foshan.

Academy level	Academy function	Representative Academy	Location of the Academy	Time of establishment
Provincial level	Guide academies at all levels	Lianfeng Academy	Shiwan Town, Chancheng District, Foshan	In the fifty years of the late Qing Dynasty (1718)

Academy level	Academy function	Representative Academy	Location of the Academy	Time of establishment
Prefectural and county level	Academic research	Yungu Academy	Xiqiao Mountain Scenic Area, Nanhai District, Foshan City	In 1517, the twelfth year of the Zhengde period of the Ming Dynasty
Private family level	Family learning	Zeng's Family School	Xincun, Beijiao Town, Shunde District, Foshan City	In 1411, the ninth year of the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty
Privately-run rural level	Rural learning	Fushan Academy	Zumiao Sub-district, Chancheng District, Foshan City	In 1792, the fifty-seventh year of the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty

2.3 Teaching types of the Foshan academies

For the Lecture-based teaching type, teaching in lecture-based academies is mainly based on lectures in lecture halls, with fewer examinations. Attention is paid to the construction of lecture halls and front courtyards. For example, Sanhu Academy invites virtuous people and gives lectures on schedule for nine months a year. It creates a solemn lecture space and standardizes the lecture content, creating a good learning atmosphere for the academy.

For the examination-based teaching type, this type of academy focuses on examinations and aims to take the imperial examinations. There is less content of preaching and lecturing. Therefore, the construction of examination-based academies is mainly based on dormitories for self-study. For example, Lianfeng Academy was built in the fiftieth year of the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty. At that time, it was an educational place for the feudal imperial examinations for the children of the village. There were a few lectures, and they focused on taking examinations. Through this examination-based teaching method, a model suitable for imperial examinations was established.

Results

The artistic characteristics of the architectural space of Foshan academies show integrated development of three cultures, including the Central Plains culture, the local culture, and the overseas culture, which are unique and attach great importance to the cultural connotations of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

1. Traditional distribution of Foshan is affected by multiple factors such as politics, culture, and economy, and it has the distribution characteristics of choosing a superior place and the reclusive culture of Buddhism and Taoism

The Foshan academies show the characteristic of unbalanced distribution in terms of site selection (as shown in Figure 2), which is mainly affected by the following three aspects. First, it is affected by academic dissemination and politics. The construction of the academies began with sacrifices to predecessors and continued to exist by relying on predecessors. Its site selection, popularity, and survival are all affected by the characteristics of relevant representative celebrities, such as famous Confucian scholars, such as Chen Baisha and Zhan Ruoshui. Their thoughts attach importance to the geographical environment with beautiful mountains and clear waters, and outstanding people. Second, the establishment of the Foshan academies is affected by policies and funds. Government-run academies have received stable support from government funds for a long time, so they have a longer duration and are located closer to the political and cultural center of Foshan. The funds for private academies mainly come from irregular donations or fundraising and borrowing from officials, gentry, and merchants, and construction is carried out with rent money. For example, Sanhu Academy was built with donations from Chen Shanqi, the county magistrate. This academy maintains its operation with fixed sacrificial fields, shops, and taxes from

temples. Third, it is affected by the Buddhist culture. Judging from the large number of academies still existing in Foshan today, Buddhism has a profound influence on the development of the academies. Site selection of the Foshan academies is mostly affected by the environmental concept of choosing a superior place and lecturing in Zen forests in Buddhism; as a result, the phenomenon that the Foshan academies are located near Buddhist temples can be easily found.

As can be seen from the picture, the distribution of academies in the Chancheng District of Foshan is the densest (as shown in Figure 2). Shunde District gathers multiple traditional academies. Thus, it can be seen that the more developed the politics, economy, and culture are, the greater the distribution density of academies is.



Figure 2 Spatio-temporal distribution characteristics of academies in Foshan

Note: Constructed by the author

2. Forming the artistic characteristics of the Foshan academies with Lingnan characteristics that combine the architectural style of Guangfu with the thought of following the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues and maintaining order based on superiority and inferiority.

2.1 Spatial layout form

The development of the space of the Foshan academies is closely related to the trend of integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in the Lingnan region. The architectural space form of the Foshan academies mainly adopts the form of a quadrangle courtyard. Buildings of the academies are built around the atria. As the core of the building complex, the atriums reflect the layout principle that their spatial layout emphasizes following the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues and maintaining order based on superiority and inferiority. Analyzed from the perspective of the building axis, the lecture halls, book collections, and sacrifices of the Foshan academies are all placed on the same axis, and the buildings are usually arranged in an orderly sequence according to the principle of lower front and higher back. Analyzed from the environment, in order to adapt to the climatic environment of the Lingnan region, the spatial layout form of the Foshan academies is mostly in the form of connected rooms, which is different from the separated buildings in the north. The architectural space form of the Li Ye Academy presents the layout characteristics of a quadrangle courtyard. With the introduction of Western architectural systems, the Foshan academies gradually presented different architectural forms, such as single buildings and buildings in the form of towers, which greatly enriched the architectural styles of the academies. In terms of architectural layout, most of the Foshan academies are built along slopes and are lower in front and higher in back, which is in line with the feng shui pattern of rising step by step, just in line with the schema of feng



shui concepts. For example, the Shitou Academy in the Shitou Huo's Ancestral Hall in Foshan, even on flat ground, also has a pattern of rising upward for each entrance through the platform base.

2.2 Characteristics of functional division

Lingnan academies form a symbolic discourse system through functional spaces and non-functional spaces. The functional spaces mainly include lecture halls, library buildings, sacrificial rites, and other lecture and sacrificial spaces. The non-functional spaces mainly include garden spaces such as pan ponds, pan forests, pan bridges, steles, inscriptions, and commemorative ancestral halls. The internal functional division of the Foshan academies is characterized and has multiple functions such as lecturing, teaching apprentices, academic research, book collection, sacrificial rites, living, and recreation. As a whole, it is strictly by the regulations and sequence of academies, and the rules are mainly influenced by Chinese traditional rites and music, ethical laws, and traditional aesthetic laws.

The main functions of the Foshan academies can be classified into three gradient spaces. The first gradient space is the lecture space. The lecture space is the main space of the academies, mainly focusing on daily teaching and academic research. The main halls of the academies undertake these functions. Book collection is an ancillary function of the lecture space, playing the roles of collecting, guarding, repairing, and lending books. The second gradient space is the sacrificial space, it is mainly for sacrificing to Confucian sages such as Confucius, the Five Masters of the Song Dynasty or local famous sages and officials, is a manifestation of the psychology of imitating the ancients and plays the role of correcting the orthodoxy and inheriting the orthodox Confucian Neo-Confucianism culture (Wang, 2011). The sacrificial space in the academies is similar to commemorative religious places such as Confucian temples and ancestral halls. The third gradient space is the garden space (Liu, 1939). The combination method is that several architectural spaces enclose a courtyard. The space highlights the importance of education with natural beauty. Taking the two-entry Sanhu Academy as an example, its spatial layout is realized along the mountain and is ingeniously integrated with the natural landscape at the foot of Xiqiao Mountain. Affiliated scenic spots of the original Sanhu Academy include the evening-view leisure, the washing-stone evening cooling-down part, Ruogu Rock, Shufang Garden, Yuchi Ink Waves, and Inspirational Stones. Among them, the Shufang Poetry Society was once established in the Shufang Garden in the Sanhu Academy. Internal functions are clear, and division is clear, which is convenient for ancient students to read, walk, wash, discuss learning, and worship (Zhong, 2022).

2.3 Decorative features

Due to factors such as the geographical climate, the regional culture and living customs, the Foshan academies have formed unique architectural decoration characteristics of scholar culture, that is, in terms of decoration and color, simplicity, freshness, and elegance are focused, importance to the expression of symbolic meaning of symbols is attached, and they are good at creating a decorative cultural atmosphere for reading with a peaceful mind.

First, the roof decoration of the Foshan academies presents a hard mountain shape. Wooden beams and stone column bases are all decorated with carvings. Doors and windows are mostly decorated with hollow carvings to meet ventilation function requirements. Roof tiles are mostly black and present gray-black in the sunlight, and the black color ratio is also the largest. The shape of the roof tiles is water drop-shaped. Second, its decorative content is also deeply influenced by the Confucian etiquette culture. The decoration in the architectural space of the academies, as a material carrier for the display of Confucian culture, reflects the pursuit of the literati for freshness, elegance, and peaceful reading. For decorative pottery roof ridges and lime sculptures on the roof, shapes such as books and arowanas are incorporated, which present the local cultural characteristics of worshiping, reading, and attaching importance to reputation. Compared with the interior space decoration, the decoration at entrances and roofs of the academy building space is larger in volume, more intricate, and delicate. In terms of color, black is used as the base, and traditional Lingnan colors such as red, yellow, and green are used for matching. Third, Foshan residents attach importance to business, are enthusiastic towards outsiders, and are pragmatic in handling affairs. And local Foshan residents attach importance to local ancestral culture, establish family reputation,





and pay attention to family blood inheritance. Over a long time, the unique Foshan culture has been formed, which affects the decorative characteristics of local academies.

2.4 Spatial materials

In terms of decorative materials of the Foshan academies, the decorative materials can be divided into six categories, including wood carving, stone carving, brick carving, pottery sculpture, lime sculpture, and murals, which can be summarized as three carvings, two sculptures, and one painting. The space decoration of the Foshan academies is mostly based on the wood structure, and Cantonese wood carving is famous for its delicate carving techniques. The decorations of beams, brackets, screen doors, and windows in the academy are all made of hollowed-out wood carving patterns made by double-sided carving techniques. Hollowed-out wood carvings can not only be used to beautify the architectural space but also have practical value. The hollowed-out parts of the patterns can increase ventilation and lighting in the space, enhance transparency of the space, and are also more suitable for the high-temperature and humid climate environment in the Lingnan region, taking into account both aesthetic and practical needs. The wood carvings of the Shitou Academy also use the techniques of hollowed-out carving. Although it is located in the beam part, it does not appear heavy. The patterns of wood carving decorations include images such as Lingnan fruits and bamboo baskets, and Kui dragon patterns are also used as connecting patterns.

In addition to Cantonese wood carvings, the pottery sculpture craftsmanship in Shiwan, Foshan, is also well-known. Pottery roof ridges of the Foshan academies have a full composition; the colors are mainly blue and green, with yellow and white. The overall colors are bright and rich; the pottery sculptures have vivid movements and expressions, showing the superb pottery sculpture skills of Foshan. The brick carvings in the Foshan academies are mainly made of blue bricks and are mostly used to decorate corridor doors, walls, and gables. The patterns are carved one by one and then spliced and inlaid on the wall to form a layered form and create a three-dimensional effect. The brick carvings of the Foshan academies also use images of flowers, fruits, and opera characters as decorative patterns (Zhong, 2022).

The lime sculpture in the Foshan academies is made of straws, lime, and glutinous rice flour. It has the characteristics of acid resistance, alkali resistance, and is not easy to fade, and can better adapt to the hot and humid climate environment with abundant rainfall in the Lingnan region. The lime sculpture in the Foshan academies is mainly used for ridges of roofs and vertical ridges of gables. It not only increases the weight of the roof ridges to hold down the tiles but also enriches the decoration of the roofs. Basic patterns of the roof ridge lime sculpture in the Foshan academies are mainly presented in the form of a black background and white edges.

3. Forming the cultural core and the academy spirits of the Foshan academies, which are the combination of rites and music, taking on the responsibility of upholding the Tao and the integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

As a gathering place of the Lingnan culture, the Foshan academies have formed a unique cultural connotation that attaches importance to traditional Confucianism and integrates Chinese and Western cultures in the development of the overseas culture, the Central Plains culture, and the local culture.

First, for the cultural characteristics of emphasizing the combination of rites and music in Confucianism and the dual emphasis on education and academia with taking on the responsibility of upholding the Tao, the culture of the Foshan academies continues the material, institutional, behavioral, and spiritual cultures of traditional Chinese academies and affects the rite and music culture in the Foshan region and even the Lingnan region. The ideological core that emphasizes the spirit is reflected in the pursuit of Confucian culture. Taking the Confucian culture as the noumenon and injecting special cultures of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk culture, it embodies the characteristics of harmony in Confucian rites and music, and takes on the responsibility of adhering to the Way. The Tianxin Academy added sacrifices to five predecessors of Song Confucian scholars during the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty. At that time, textbooks for students were mostly the Three-Character Classic, Four Books, and Five Classics, and mainly instilled Confucian moral ethics. In the visual symbol expression form of culture, its visual symbols are generally processed through simple geometric design based on the selected things to form graphics that





convey meanings and implications. Foshan academies have inherited the culture and the craftsmanship of traditional academies in the Central Plains and mostly use geometric images to express the cultural connotations of the Foshan academies. The expression techniques of symbolism are utilized, and there are mostly auspicious patterns with rich connotations, including flower and fruit themes, such as lotus, plum blossom, pomegranate, peach, and other fruits, as well as magpies, ducks, one-horned lions, etc.

Second, the Chinese and Western cultures are integrated. Compared with academies in the Central Plains region, the Foshan academies have a higher degree of integration of Chinese and Western cultures and a stronger overseas culture. This is closely related to Guangdong being a trading port during the Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty, the influx of foreign cultures, and the proactive attitude of Foshan people to embrace new things and be open. In the architectural details of the Foshan academies, there are often influences of Western architectural elements such as arches and columns. The open and inclusive cultural atmosphere of Foshan enables students to receive the enlightenment of new ideas and accept foreign Western cultures with an open mind in the academies.

Third, the academy spirit reflected by the Foshan academies is an important part of the Lingnan cultural spirit. Hu Shi once believed that academies should have three spirits, including the spirits of the times, lecturing and discussing politics, self-cultivation, and research. Site selection of the Foshan academies away from the hustle and bustle reflects the philosophical thought of pursuing the unity of nature and humanity, the educational concept of cultivating one's moral character, and the pursuit of freedom. The architectural artistic characteristics reflect the learning atmosphere of tranquility and far-reaching vision, which is the embodiment of introspection and self-cultivation. Spaces such as lecture halls and libraries encourage academic research and cultural inheritance, and the sacrificial ritual functions of the space also reflect the human ethics of idol worship, which reveal the academic origin and indicate lecture purposes, and these are all the core contents of the academic spirit. Under the integration of cultures, the Foshan academies have nurtured a spirit of daring to explore and innovate, and encourage students to dare to challenge traditions and pursue new knowledge. The moral character traits and moral education connotations condensed by these spirits not only played an important role in history but also still have important inspiration and value in the construction of the socialist core value system in contemporary colleges and universities. They are of great significance for promoting cultural inheritance and innovation and enhancing the soft power of urban culture.

Discussion

The spatial characteristics and functional organization of academies have been central to understanding their cultural and architectural significance. Research indicates that the arrangement of sacrificial spaces often reflects their symbolic importance and adherence to hierarchical principles. The positioning of sacrificial spaces towards the middle or rear sections of academy layouts aligns with Confucian ideals of order and superiority (Wang, 2011). This spatial configuration emphasizes the solemnity and ritual significance of these areas, reinforcing the hierarchical structure embedded in academic culture.

Elevation changes within academies also play a significant role in conveying a sense of progression and hierarchy. Studies on Lingnan academies reveal that architectural elevations often increase from foyers to lecture halls and sacrificial spaces, enhancing their visual prominence and imbuing the spaces with a ritualistic atmosphere (Liu, 1939). This design approach reflects the integration of Confucian ideology into architectural practices, where spatial sequences mirror the moral and educational values of the time.

The proportional relationships within academy architecture, including the width, depth, and height of halls, are indicative of the meticulous planning and symbolic considerations in their construction. The spatial dimensions of Lingnan academies, particularly those in Foshan, demonstrate clear patterns and align with traditional principles of harmony and balance (Liu, 2013). These design principles not only meet functional needs but also contribute to the aesthetic and cultural coherence of the spaces.



Moreover, the transformation of academic spaces over time reflects broader socio-political and economic changes. The evolution of academy layouts in response to shifts in national consciousness, economic development, and geopolitical influences highlights their adaptability and resilience as cultural institutions (Zhong, 2022). The integration of cross-cultural elements, particularly in regions with significant external influences, underscores the dynamic nature of academies as both educational and cultural hubs.

The findings in this study support previous research on the interplay between imperial politics, patriarchal authority, and the spatial organization of academies (Lowenthal, 2015). Furthermore, the incorporation of local and regional characteristics into academic architecture demonstrates the significance of geographic and cultural context in shaping these spaces. This study adds to existing literature by emphasizing the artistic and functional integration of academy spaces in Foshan, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their historical and cultural legacy.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the significant role of Foshan academies as vital conduits for cultural and academic inheritance, despite their comprehensive restructuring in modern times. Our findings illuminate how various cultural forms and political systems have historically influenced the morphological evolution of these academies. Specifically, the research highlights that: (1) the distribution and site selection of Foshan academies have been historically unbalanced, shaped by political, economic, and cultural influences such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; (2) the architectural sequence and spatial depth of the academies foster a solemn atmosphere that respects traditional hierarchies and embodies the cultural concept of progressive elevation; (3) the architectural style of the academies showcases the distinctive Lingnan region's influence, with decorative arts that not only seek blessings but also reflect the semiotic characteristics of three carvings and two sculptures, encapsulating the local culture, geography, and climate; (4) the enduring ethos of the academies, encapsulating rites and music alongside a commitment to upholding the Tao and integrating Chinese and Western cultures, forms the core of their spiritual and cultural identity.

To enhance the practical impact of these findings, the study proposes targeted recommendations for preserving the architectural and cultural heritage of Foshan academies. Future efforts should focus on:

Developing guidelines for the balanced restoration and modern use of academy spaces, ensuring they serve both educational and community functions.

Enhancing public awareness and engagement in academic preservation, leveraging digital technologies for virtual tours and interactive learning experiences.

Encouraging interdisciplinary research to deepen understanding of the academies' architectural nuances and their cultural connotations.

While this study has made significant strides in documenting the artistic and architectural characteristics of Foshan academies, it acknowledges certain limitations, such as the insufficient integration of chronological and spatial analyses, which could provide a more holistic understanding of the academies' development. Furthermore, a more profound exploration of the academies' spirits and cultural connotations is necessary to fully grasp their role and impact in contemporary education and culture.

Recommendation

1. General Recommendations

Preservation efforts should focus on safeguarding the architectural and cultural heritage of Foshan academies. Systematic documentation, restoration of physical structures, and protection of decorative elements are essential to maintaining their historical and artistic significance. Traditional academy values, such as Confucian principles of morality and education, should be integrated into modern cultural and educational systems to promote awareness of their relevance in contemporary society. Additionally, adaptive reuse of academy spaces as cultural hubs, educational centers, or heritage museums can enhance



their functionality while preserving their historical essence. Community involvement and policy support are vital for ensuring sustainable development and maintaining the connection between the academies and their cultural roots.

2. Further Research Recommendations

Future research should delve deeper into the comparative analysis of academies across different regions and cultures, highlighting regional adaptations and cross-cultural influences. The use of digital tools, such as 3D modeling and GIS mapping, can provide valuable insights into the spatial and artistic characteristics of academies. Studies should also focus on the symbolic and artistic elements of decoration, exploring their cultural narratives and historical evolution. Research on sustainable conservation methods and adaptive reuse models can guide modern interventions, while longitudinal studies can evaluate the socio-cultural impacts of academic heritage projects, offering a comprehensive understanding of their legacy and relevance.

Fund projects

In 2022, Guangdong Province Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project "Research on Optimization of Curriculum System for Environmental Design Professionals in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area under the Background of Integration of Production and Education"; 2024 Guangdong University of Finance and Economics Graduate Education Comprehensive Reform project, graduate curriculum ideological and political demonstration project "Sustainable Design Practice" course phased research results; General Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning of Guangdong Province in 2024: Research on the History of Modern Interior Design in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GD24CYS18); The Youth Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project of Guangdong Province in 2024, "Research on the Protection and Communication Strategy of Chaozhou Historical and Cultural District under the Vision of Digital Technology and Media Convergence" (GD24YY13).

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