

Spatial Symbols: An Analysis of Cultural Characteristics of Interior Furnishings in Huizhou Residential Houses

Xuebing Fang^{1,a}, Xin Yang^{1,b,*}

¹Huainan Normal University, Dongshan West Road, Huainan City, China
a. xbfang@hnnu.edu.cn, b. yangxin989@163.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: The interior furnishings of Huizhou residential houses embody their own ideological connotations and cultural metaphors. They utilize order, symbols, and imagery to express spiritual concepts and value orientations. This paper analyzes the cultural characteristics of interior furnishings in Huizhou residential houses from the perspectives of spatial relationships, the fractal isomorphism of the Heaven-Man structure, the transformation of the scholar-merchant fusion style, the symbolization of Neo-Confucianism, and the aesthetic pursuit of the literati, elucidating the intrinsic logic of Huizhou interior furnishings based on the Tianren concept and the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng-Zhu school.

Keywords: Huizhou residential houses, symbols, furnishings, culture

1. Introduction

The formation of Huizhou society underwent stages including the Baiyue stage, Shanyue stage, Xin'an stage, and the development of Shezhou stage. Particularly, after the Southern Song Dynasty moved its capital to Hangzhou, Huizhou's relationship with Suzhou and Hangzhou became intimate, making it an important economic and cultural region nationwide. Especially in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the mainstream ideology was formed by the absorption of Taoist and Zen thoughts into the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. People advocated morality, loved nature, and embraced the inward-looking spirit of self-improvement, leading to social civilization advancement. The close relationship between scholars and merchants, the flourishing literary style, and the highly developed and distinctive characteristics of Huizhou culture profoundly influenced lifestyles and modes of expression. After a large number of successful Huizhou merchants returned home in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, they constructed numerous residential houses, ancestral halls, and academies. Huizhou culture, as a conceptual entity, was concretely reflected in various parts of architecture. Among them, the furnishings of Huizhou residential houses, while adapting to the lifestyle, actively represent cultural concepts. They typically employ symbolic metaphors to convey meaning and participate in the construction of complex spiritual ideals through other elements.

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2. Analysis of Interior Space and Furnishing Elements in Huizhou Residential Houses

There are three aspects to the interior space characteristics of Huizhou residential houses. Firstly, they emphasize the beauty of “Zhongzheng” (中正). Chinese architecture emphasizes the order of “Zhongzheng orientation,” where “Zhong” reflects hierarchical relationships, and “Zheng” expresses spatial formal relationships. These attributes constitute the spatial paradigm of traditional architecture. Secondly, they emphasize symmetrical layout. “Zhongzheng” relies on perceptible axes to establish order, constructing distinct horizontal and vertical axes to form structural space, reflecting the consciousness of the natural order within spatial structures. Thirdly, they use spatial metaphors to represent time, forming a spatial consciousness that integrates time and space. Typically, in Huizhou architecture, the “front door - main hall - rear hall” direction is symmetrical along the vertical axis, with the main hall space serving social etiquette, ceremonial activities, etc., being the space with the most varied furnishings and cultural information. Through the presence or absence of furnishing elements and symbols, it becomes the primary site for generating and transmitting meaning. Similar to the rear hall being a living space, the side wing rooms are private spaces mainly furnished with everyday items, meeting basic living conditions. The diverse folk beliefs and customs nurtured by Huizhou society, primarily based on agricultural production, make residential houses the main venue for folk activities. Especially in the main hall space, different spatial themes are created by changing scenes, adapting decorations and images, and altering furnishing styles during various folk activities.

The interior furnishings of Huizhou residential houses mainly refer to the arrangement and display of indoor furniture, decorative items, and everyday necessities, including the forms and combinations of furniture, the arrangement and display of couplets, calligraphy and paintings, ceramics, bonsai, and other items. The different arrangements of these material furnishing elements reflect the consciously chosen lifestyle and value pursuits under Huizhou culture, carrying desires and ideals, and metaphorically representing underlying cultural spirits.

3. Basic Concept of Interior Furnishing in Huizhou Residential Houses: Cultural Characteristics of Heaven-Man Fractal Isomorphism

The concept of Heaven-Man fractal isomorphism is the key to understanding the mental code of interior furnishings in Huizhou residential houses. The American mathematician B.B. Mandelbrot first proposed the concept of fractals, which he defined as forms that exhibit infinite similarity between parts and the whole [1]. Later, the concept of fractals was applied to morphology, mainly referring to the morphological relationships between parts and wholes or between parts themselves in a similar manner. The core feature of fractals is self-similarity. In Huizhou culture, “Heaven” represents the overarching whole, while “Man” represents the part. Human relationships originate from the Heavenly Way, forming a fractal isomorphic relationship between “Man” and “Heaven,” also known as the Heavenly Way pattern.

The Heavenly Way pattern serves as the fundamental cognitive pattern for interior furnishings in Huizhou residential houses. Chinese culture originates from the cognition of “Heaven,” expressed in cultural concepts such as “Dao, Ren, Li, Qi, Chan,” forming the ideological and value models of the Heavenly Way. Laozi’s theory of “attaining the One” suggests that the microcosm within the human body corresponds to the macrocosm of nature [2]. It posits that the rhythms of the human body, natural laws, and cosmic rhythms are in harmony. This later evolved into the idea of social movements being in harmony, known as the “Heavenly Way,” which can be understood as the inviolable “laws of nature.” Due to the powerful and uncontrollable will of Heaven, humans cannot control it and are directly included as part of Heaven. This forms the cultural values of “unity of Heaven and Man,” wherein one knows their destiny but cannot overstep it. Dong Zhongshu of the Han Dynasty famously said, “The great origin of the Way comes from Heaven,” and Han Confucianism gradually evolved into a

model of Heaven-Man resonance, combining Heavenly-Man resonance with social governance, evolving into specific operational forms. The symbolized relationship of Heavenly-Man resonance specifically constructs social and cultural forms from the macro to the micro level, reflected in various aspects of social culture and life, all of which can be traced back to the so-called relationship between Heaven and Man, namely the fractal isomorphic relationship between Heaven and Man.

The Environment of Huizhou Settlements Exhibits Heavenly-Man Fractal Relationships. In terms of the macroscopic human settlement environment, Huizhou's village clusters respect and do not interfere with the natural order and rhythms, forming a homologous relationship between the Heavenly Way and human ethics. The fusion of the southern column-and-beam style and the northern elevated courtyard style architecture has created the characteristics of Huizhou architecture, combining the southern emphasis on natural environment dependence with the northern emphasis on hierarchy and ritual relationships, thus generating a Heavenly Way fractal relationship. Zhao Jishi's "Ji Yuan Ji Suo Ji" records, "Feng Shui theory, Huizhou people particularly value it, and most disputes and conflicts arise from it" [3]. The Huizhou people's concept of Feng Shui is actually the application of the symbolized relationship of Heavenly-Man resonance.

In terms of the microscopic indoor environment of residential houses, it is also a Heavenly-Man fractal relationship. In traditional Chinese residential culture, buildings are considered as the universe, a space integrated with time and space, and a space where Heaven and Man are united. Therefore, Huizhou residential houses use wood carvings arranged in corresponding positions to represent the Heavenly-Man fractal relationship. For example, carving cloud patterns and images of immortals on the beams and brackets of buildings symbolizes the homologous relationship with "Heaven," achieving the harmony between Heaven and Earth and conforming to the Heavenly Way. The concept of harmony between Heaven and Earth actually replaces the causal relationship of things with the correspondence relationship of physical objects, creating necessary accidental phenomena, which is unified with the Heavenly Way. This mode of thinking is not the result of ignorance but a spiritual pursuit transcending the mundane. People actively seek universal correlations between things, especially metaphorical connections between abstract forms and pure concepts, such as directional relationships, size relationships, positive-negative relationships, color relationships, and even modulus relationships.

The correspondence between Heaven and Man in architecture is also reflected in furniture arrangement. Following the "Zhongzheng" order of interior space, there is a cognitive model of "West Superiority and North Respect" and "Central Axis Authority," where gods, ancestors, and revered figures occupy hierarchical spaces in sequence. "Lun Yu Wei Zheng" records, "To govern by virtue is like the North Star. It occupies its place, and all the stars pay homage to it." This means that the emperor governs the state with virtue, which, like the North Star, is surrounded and revered by many stars, enduring for a long time. Researchers believe that placing the west as superior may be related to the ancient Yin people's worship of the sun^①. This symbolism, based on the logic of venerating ancestors and the cosmos, is intricately manifested in furniture arrangements. The interior furnishings of Huizhou residential houses adhere to principles of axial symmetry, clear order, ethical appropriateness, and naturalness, establishing a homologous relationship among human living patterns, settlement environments, architectural spaces, and furniture arrangements.

^① Yin people performed rituals of greeting and bidding farewell to the sun daily, embodying elements of sun worship. According to the "Book of Rites: Characteristics of the Suburbs," it states: "The southern direction of the ruler represents the response to the sun."

4. Style Shift in Interior Furnishings of Huizhou Residential Houses: Cultural Characteristics of Scholar-Merchant Integration

In Huizhou, people's livelihoods depend on commerce, contrasting with the agricultural reliance of other regions. The success of Huizhou merchants led to market monopolies in certain sectors, forming large capital conglomerates. The role of capital elevated the status of merchants gradually. Huizhou merchants, through capital and education, cultivated bureaucrats within their families. They then expanded their market resources and commercial competitiveness through bureaucratic positions. Over time, the historically distant relationship between scholars and merchants began to converge in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, mutually attracting each other. Huizhou merchants formed a new type of group with dual identities as bureaucrats and businessmen. They had a profound impact on socioeconomic development and challenged the existing social class order. Consequently, there was a shift in ideology from agriculture-oriented thinking to one that embraced commerce and industry. For instance, Wang Daokun from She County in Huizhou, who passed the imperial examination in 1547 and held official positions until 1573, advocated for a theory of equal importance for commerce and agriculture. In his "Taihan Collection," he criticized the emphasis on agriculture over commerce by rulers of past dynasties, advocating for a policy of treating commerce and agriculture equally. He proposed that the government should implement concrete measures to facilitate commerce and improve the business environment. These policies marked a new direction in breaking away from the confinement of agrarianism, injecting ideological impetus into the elevation of the status of the commercial classes.

In agrarian Chinese society, scholars were the highest social class. They ranked above farmers in the "four occupations" hierarchy. Even the emperor would dress as a farmer during agricultural activities to encourage agricultural production. The identity of scholars evolved across different historical stages, from warriors in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period to literati later on, eventually becoming officials in the Qin and Han Dynasties. In summary, scholars were a combination of intellectuals and bureaucrats, and their social status differed significantly from that of merchants and commoners. According to Confucianism, scholars pursued the greater good of the world, while merchants pursued personal gain. Thus, the emphasis on agriculture and the suppression of commerce persisted, and traditional scholars looked down upon merchants. However, by the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the social changes in the interaction between scholars and merchants became the backdrop of the era. The convergence of Confucianism and commerce, or even the abandonment of Confucianism in favor of commerce, became a fashionable way for individuals to enter society. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in the Huizhou region, where the lack of natural resources meant that surplus population could not engage in agriculture. To escape this reality, individuals either pursued education to become Confucian scholars and officials or ventured into commerce. These two paths interacted and led to various life trajectories.

The pursuit of scholarly excellence leading to official positions deeply penetrated the hearts of the people in Huizhou, with a clear path of development. Consequently, education became a conscious effort and spiritual pursuit for the people of Huizhou. Moreover, elders eagerly desired to see talented individuals emerging from the younger generation to supply more officials for the government. Under the guidance of this collective consciousness, numerous private schools and academies were constructed on a large scale. According to local historical records, there were 1,962 academies in Huizhou during the Ming Dynasty and 4,365 academies during the Qing Dynasty. This number was 1.49 times the total number of academies from the Tang, Five Dynasties, Liao, Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties combined [4]. Private schools were even more widespread. For example, in Huizhou's Chengkan Village, more than 270 years of the Ming Dynasty saw the emergence of over 110 officials ranked as or higher than Chief Clerk, with the village still preserving over 30 tablets

inscribed by renowned figures such as Dong Qichang and Lin Zexu [5]. Zhu Xi once praised Chengkan as “the foremost village in Jiangnan for its twin talents”.

The fusion of scholars and merchants constituted a distinctive feature of Huizhou’s cultural landscape. Venturing into business allowed Huizhou scholars to gain a deeper understanding of the role of economic systems in societal development, leading them to approach the scholar-merchant relationship with a more rational attitude. For instance, Wang Maoyin from Qizi Village in She County of Huizhou during the Qing Dynasty lost his mother at the age of six and was primarily raised by his grandmother while his father engaged in business. The youth devoted himself diligently to studying, but initially engaged in business for a period before passing the imperial examinations at various levels, entering governmental departments such as the Ministry of Revenue, Military, Industry, and Civil Affairs, and serving in important positions for over thirty years. His monetary and fiscal reform policies were acknowledged by Marx and he remains the only Chinese individual mentioned in “Capital.” Wang Maoyin’s experiences profoundly underscore the powerful role of commerce in socio-economic development, advocating for the protection and elevation of the status of merchants’ interests. Wang Maoyin once wrote the following couplet for the ancestral temple of Qizi Village: “With a shared ancestry, the strong should not oppress the weak, the many should not bully the few, the wealthy should not exploit the poor. Everyone must care for and assist each other in times of hardship, showing reverence for ancestors. Though the four occupations are different, scholars will gain fame, farmers will amass grain, artisans will craft skillfully, and merchants will accumulate wealth. If one indulges in leisure and does not engage in labor, it is not due to a preference but rather a lack of necessity. This is the conduct of filial and virtuous sons.” This couplet reflects his identity as both a great scholar and a great merchant, as well as his pursuit of equality between scholars and merchants.

In this context, entering government service as merchants and traders became a new avenue for Confucian ideals. Hu Xueyan, a prominent Huizhou merchant from Jixi, was “rewarded with a yellow robe for his outstanding achievements,” breaking the norms of the time. In the Qing Dynasty history, Hu Xueyan was the only wealthy merchant known for wearing a red-topped hat and a yellow robe. Additionally, Lu Bangxie (1801-1866), the 33rd generation ancestor of Lu Village in Huizhou, relocated to Lu Village, Qijiali. Lu Bangxie engaged in business in his early years, achieving great wealth before later entering politics and becoming a prominent official of the dynasty.

Against this backdrop, the metaphorical expressions in the interior decoration of Huizhou dwellings reflected the shifting style towards the fusion of scholar and merchant. For example, when Huizhou merchant Wang Dinggui constructed the main gate of Chengzhi Hall, he emulated the official style, designing it as an “eight-character” gate with an additional ritual gate. Typically, the use of a ritual gate was prohibited in private residences, but Wang Dinggui’s insistence on its inclusion symbolized the fusion of official and merchant identities. Furthermore, within the interior decoration of these residences, there were commonly engraved patterns featuring vases and three halberds, symbolizing the aspiration for career advancement, as the pronunciation of this combination in Chinese sounds like “ascending three ranks.” The prominent “商” (shāng) character displayed on the gate of Chengzhi Hall vividly engaged people in collectively generating the meaning of seeking wealth. These decorations vividly illustrate the ideal of mutual mobility and equality between the scholar and merchant classes, indicating the increasingly prevalent style of integration between the two.

5. The Symbolic Field of Interior Decoration in Huizhou Dwellings: Cultural Characteristics of Neo-Confucianism Metaphors

Neo-Confucianism, as an important spiritual aspect of the development and evolution of Confucianism, gradually became the mainstream ideology in China after the Southern Song Dynasty.

Neo-Confucianism emphasizes achieving profound understanding of the universe and human life through introspection, self-cultivation, and practice, establishing strict order and norms to uphold the interests of the ruling class. Huizhou, coincidentally, is the hometown of the prominent Confucian scholar Zhu Xi. During Zhu Xi's lifetime, his academic thoughts were not widely accepted, leading to fluctuations in his career, including being dismissed from official positions. However, Zhu Xi's school of thought began to receive attention from the court after the Jiading era. After the Yuan Dynasty, Zhu Xi's teachings were established as the national learning, and scholars were only allowed to respect and believe in them without doubt [6]. Coincidentally, both Cheng brothers of the Northern Song Dynasty² and Zhu Xi of the Southern Song Dynasty hailed from Huizhou, and their hometowns played a significant role in promoting their philosophical ideas. In the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, the concept of "li" (principle) was endowed with profound connotations, regarded as the fundamental basis and governing principle of the universe's existence and evolution. Zhu Xi further elaborated, stating: "In the vast and boundless universe, this 'li' is unique and universal. The heavens become the heavens through it, the earth becomes the earth through it, and all creatures born between heaven and earth each derive their nature from it. When this 'li' extends, it manifests as the Three Bonds and Five Constants, all of which are the dissemination and manifestation of 'li,' omnipresent." In the Neo-Confucian system, the relationships between individuals are not arbitrary or coincidental but based on the degree of blood relations. This concept not only aligns with the natural "li" but also resonates with the ancient Zhou ritual system. In the Huizhou region, this concept is particularly prominent, permeating various aspects of society and forming a unique clan social system and ethical framework. This system not only influences the daily lives of the people of Huizhou but also subtly shapes their perception and attitudes towards family, society, and the universe.

Ancestral worship is a significant manifestation of Neo-Confucianism. In the history of Huizhou, there were three large-scale migrations of Northern Central Plains immigrants who settled together in clans. Most of the major clans in Huizhou migrated from north to south [7]. Ancestral belief was highly valued in Huizhou culture, with clans establishing ancestral halls for worship, forming a clan-based social system centered around these halls. The villages of Huizhou residents were bound by natural blood ties, and based on these ties, they built an ancient and extremely stable social structure. Like a vast network connecting people with blood ties across time and space, they supported each other, forming a large resource system. Particularly in Huizhou, where natural resources were scarce, the surplus population needed to migrate for livelihoods. The dispersal of individuals led to the formation of natural connections based on special clan information codes, embodying the practical value of the common Confucian cultural spirit. Therefore, the conscious reverence for elders and ancestors led to the establishment of ancestral halls as essential spaces in Huizhou dwellings. Ancestral halls occupied the highest position within the entire building. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese society was primarily based on the paternal hierarchy, and only male ancestors' tablets were enshrined. Elders and ancestors were regarded as role models of labor and morality, referred to as "inner gods" or "household gods" for worship. Ancestral halls were spaces dedicated to housing the spirits of direct ancestors, implying that the "household gods" continued to reside with everyone. On lunar holidays or anniversaries, descendants would devoutly kneel and offer sacrifices in front of the ancestral hall.

Huizhou dwellings construct spatial axes to express the Neo-Confucian ideals of rectifying the mind, observing rituals, and cultivating the self in the secular world. Inside Huizhou dwellings, space metaphorically signifies time, forming two axial spatial sequences. The basic module consists of "one

² The two Cheng brothers of the Northern Song Dynasty, Cheng Hao (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi (1033-1107), were philosophers, educators, and founders of Neo-Confucianism in the Northern Song Dynasty. Their ancestral home was in Huangdun, Shexian, Huizhou.

bright area, two dark areas, and one courtyard.” “One bright area, two dark areas” refers to the hall and the east and west wing rooms. Following the longitudinal axis line extending backward from the courtyard to the hall, facing north is considered honorable, with each additional courtyard forming one “step,” extending until reaching the highest point, the ancestral hall, thus forming a temporal axis line. Horizontally, extending left and right from the center of the hall forms a synchronic axis line. Huizhou dwellings, in terms of spatial functionality, consist primarily of courtyards, halls, wing rooms, study rooms, and ancestral halls, with the hall and ancestral hall serving as ceremonial spaces. In residential spaces, the hall is esteemed, typically characterized in the Ming Dynasty by small halls and large rooms, simple and unadorned. In contrast, during the Qing Dynasty, halls were enlarged while rooms were diminished, emphasizing decoration and reinforcing the ceremonial function where people, ancestors, and deities converge. Through the size of the hall space, furniture arrangement, couplet inscriptions, and paintings, a direct perceptual image-text is constructed. Drawing on the theory of cultural semiotics from the Moscow-Tartu School, the interior furnishings of Huizhou dwellings form a ^③semiosphere system and combine with other “semiospheres” to construct an overall cultural text with a certain structure. The collection of furnishings elements (texts and symbols), including spatial forms, within the perceptible space, first possesses stability and then openness and inclusiveness, interacting with other diverse cultural semiospheres, generating endogenous dynamics, and continually participating in the construction of new systems. For example, the hall’s ancestral wall, located at the intersection of the main horizontal and vertical axes, serves as the central point of significance for the “ceremonial space,” expressing the core signified meaning. The ancestral wall, evolved from the Han and Tang dynasty screens, with its plaque at the visual center, acts as the core symbol of the secondary “semiosphere” text, representing core cultural significance and the hierarchy’s pinnacle in the family’s spiritual system. Additionally, the expressions of textual language and graphic imagery in the hall further contribute to the communication of meaning. Traditional landscape motifs such as mountains, rivers, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums suggest hidden aspirations, while motifs like peaches, pine trees, cranes, and Lingzhi mushrooms convey filial piety and benevolence, illustrating the Neo-Confucian concept of nature.

The indoor furnishings combine to form symbolic texts representing the values of Neo-Confucianism. Symbols, as the basic units filling the semiosphere space, function to preserve, remember, and generate information within the semiosphere space, laying out and displaying meaning. They have both content and expression: the signified is the expression side, representing the form of the symbol, while the signifier is the content side, representing the meaning of the symbol. The content of a symbol adheres to its form, and the signified of a symbol adheres to its signifier, with both mutually dependent [8]. For example, the high, large, and orderly head of the hall’s main case requires a square and solid appearance. The “clock, vase, mirror,” and the ancestors’ teachings are displayed on the head of the case, with the hat tube indicating whether the host is at home. The arrangement on the case forms a meaningful textual expression of real aspirations. Moreover, the materials and craftsmanship of the Eight Immortals table and the Grand Preceptor’s chair in front of the case are exquisite, with the height of the chair back not exceeding the height of the main case, forming a metaphorical scale, and pursuing masterful craftsmanship, indicating the level of importance. The display of plaques in the hall showcases the core spirit of the entire building,

^③ The concept of “semiosphere” is a key term in Juri Lotman’s cultural semiotics, referring to the space and mechanism in which symbols exist and operate. It serves as both the condition for cultural existence and the outcome of cultural development. This concept constitutes the core and foundation of Lotman’s theory of cultural semiotics. Inspired by the concept of the “biosphere” proposed by the Soviet chemist Vernadsky, Lotman attempted to grasp the laws of symbolic movement and development as a whole using the concept of the semiosphere.

representing the distilled teachings of the ancestors in the secular world, the values that later generations must adhere to, and the core signified of the semiosphere space. Examples include the plaque “Qing Yu Tang” in the residence of the prominent merchant with the red-topped plaque, Hu Xueyan, and the plaque “Cheng Zhi Tang” in the residence of Wang Dinggui.

6. The Pursuit of Benevolence and Righteousness in the Interior Furnishings of Huizhou Residences: Cultural Characteristics of the Gentleman’s Aesthetic Realm

Influenced by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, Huizhou culture is imbued with the ethical values of the gentleman, where everyone endeavors to cultivate themselves as gentlemen, draw inspiration from gentlemen, and have confidence in themselves as gentlemen. The aesthetic realm of the gentleman, filled with benevolence and righteousness, is a subtle, elegant, rational, and naturally harmonious state of mind. In pre-Qin Confucianism, Confucius regarded “benevolence” as the foundation of “ritual,” clearly linking the “gentleman” with “benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom,” representing a comprehensive and harmonious integration of human character, elucidating the fundamental principles of interpersonal and social dimensions. Confucius said, “The gentleman regards righteousness as essential and applies it through ritual.” “Ritual” is the code of conduct that a gentleman adheres to, yet the essence of a gentleman lies not in the “ritual” but in the “righteousness,” meaning that the practice of ritual norms must be reasonable and appropriate to truly embody the qualities of a gentleman. “Ritual” derives its essence from “righteousness,” and “righteousness” is based on “benevolence.” The deeper foundation of “ritual” lies in “benevolence,” where “ritual” is the manifestation of “benevolence,” and the proper implementation of “ritual” is essentially “benevolence,” which is what is meant by “hui shi hou su” (from “Yong Ye”)[9]. The concept of the gentleman evolved from the traditional hierarchical relationship between ruler and subject to a moral connotation corresponding to the “common man,” becoming an idealized model of personality that encompasses Confucian ethical norms such as benevolence, loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, integrity, and modesty, as well as Daoist principles of detachment, clarity of purpose, and reverence for nature.

The depiction of the gentleman’s image in furnishings closely integrates with the main body of architecture, creating an aesthetic imagery that is elegant and dignified. From the perspective of aesthetic evolution, the stringent spirit of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism constrained the aesthetic style, shedding the flamboyant and extravagant decorative interests of the Tang Dynasty and giving rise to a refined and restrained aesthetic orientation characterized by elegance and subtlety. The elegance and rational beauty established in Chinese culture during the Song Dynasty were carefully preserved throughout the Ming Dynasty. The Ming and Qing dynasties marked the heyday of Huizhou culture, where the refined, gentle, dignified, and sincere aesthetic characteristics were prominently reflected in furniture arrangements. Firstly, the furniture forms were simple and dignified, primarily featuring straight lines and squares, avoiding pursuit of unusual shapes. Similar to the carved Chinese characters of the Song Dynasty, the furniture exhibited a balance between rigidity and softness, visually light yet full of strength, with clear distinctions in size and hierarchy, adhering to the order of “ritual.” The moderate decoration of light and shadow lines achieved an upright sense, presenting a full and abundant aesthetic effect in spirit. Regarding spatial relationships, furnishings were mainly arranged symmetrically along the axis, with symmetrical beauty holding a dominant position. Similar to how furniture forms constrained behavior by prompting people to sit upright and embody gentlemanly demeanor, it demonstrated reverence for the order of the axis and its inviolability.

Huizhou dwellings also construct an abstract space of gentlemanly ambiance through pictorial forms within interior spaces. Wooden carvings present a sense of warmth and simplicity, conveying not only themes of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism but also imbuing them with themes of self-awareness characteristic of gentlemen. Particularly common are themes such as “Three Friends of

Winter,” “Four Gentlemen,” and “Four Arts,” which actively contribute to the construction of the gentlemanly aesthetic atmosphere.

Simultaneously, there are a large number of “antique” themed images decorating furniture and doors and windows. Some of these “antique” images are independent thematic patterns, while others are incorporated as elements into other images, such as those combined with vases, flowers, and sacrificial offerings, exhibiting diverse forms. The “antique” images symbolize respect for antiquity and elegance, where the meaning of “antique” is broadened and gradually symbolized, forming rich metaphors when combined with other patterns. They reflect an aspiration for the demeanor of a gentleman and a positive attitude towards life. These images serve to supplement the lack of meaning, enabling the spatial environment to form a homologous relationship with the psychological environment, demonstrating moral standards and the principles of maintaining interpersonal relationships, while exuding the simple meaning of the gentleman’s integrity and benevolence.

7. Conclusion

The discovery of Huizhou documents has constructed a platform for the study of Huizhou learning, enabling a thorough understanding of Huizhou’s social development and revealing the specific origins of the transformation of Huizhou’s ideological culture into customs. The concept of the Tianren fractal in the furnishing of Huizhou dwellings and furniture reveals the ideological origins and pursuit of the spirit of Neo-Confucianism, gradually evolving from a system of spiritual concepts into an operable system of behavior and observable performance, forming a secondary structure that continues to inherit and evolve, interacting with individuals and society. The characteristic of the integration of scholars and merchants reflects the compromise and equality resulting from the loosening of social classes after the high development of economy and culture, while the gentlemanly aesthetic of simplicity, integrity, and benevolence demonstrates the specific form of Huizhou culture. In conclusion, the interior furnishings of Huizhou dwellings are not simply combinations arranged for functionality, but rather specific deductions and expressions based on Huizhou’s social and cultural values. If viewed as objects, the interior furnishings of Huizhou dwellings constitute a temporal-spatial text within a cultural context, from which we derive concepts and reconstruct new ideologies.

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