

# Analysis of the Three-Layer Structure Design of Traditional Chinese Culture

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the structure of China's fine traditional culture and divides it into three interrelated dimensions: the "explicit object layer", the "formal system layer", and the "core spirit layer". At the level of objects, the selection of materials, the creation of shapes and the painting of patterns are not merely processes but material carriers of spiritual concepts. At the institutional level, the ritual system, the clan system and the economic system transformed abstract ethics into operational social practices. At the spiritual level, the cosmology of "harmony between man and nature", the aesthetic view of "moderation", the introverted transcendence of "self-cultivation" and the practical rationality of "applying knowledge to the world" jointly constitute the core value of culture.

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## Keywords

Harmony between Man and nature  
Traditional culture "System"

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## 1. Visible Object Layer

In the context of design, when exploring the excellent traditional Chinese culture, the level of objects constitutes the most concrete and intuitive dimension of interpretation<sup>[1]</sup>. Ceramics, woodwork, metal and jade products are not merely static figurative objects but also embody the creative ideas of our ancestors. They serve as material carriers of aesthetic consciousness and values, clearly reflecting the culture of a nation. When we examine an object, behind its materials, forms and patterns, there often lies a deep-seated spiritual structure of a civilization<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 1.1. Material selection

The selection of materials in the making of traditional Chinese artifacts has never been a mere technical decision, but rather a materialized expression of Chinese traditional culture<sup>[3]</sup>. When artisans encounter natural materials such as jade, wood and metal, the first thing they do is to make a spiritual identification and endow them with value. The most typical example is the reverence for jade. Ancient people identified the unique quality of jade among numerous stones. Its warm texture when touched symbolizes benevolence, its dense and tough texture represents wisdom and courage, and its clear and melodious sound is associated with rites and

music. This concept of “a gentleman compares his virtue to jade” has elevated the mining and carving of jade materials to a form of moral cultivation and spiritual projection. Similarly, the understanding of the “earth” and “fire” in ceramics also transcends the realm of physics. Soil is regarded as the carrier of “Kun De”, carrying the potential to nurture all things. The kiln fire is regarded as the “masculine” power, a magical energy that brings about transformation. During the Song Dynasty, Ru Kiln and official kiln pursued the “sky blue” glaze color, with the ideal of capturing the natural image of a clear sky after rain. Behind this was a devout pursuit of “following the way of nature” Ming-style furniture was crafted from hardwoods such as zitan and huanghuali not only for their durable nature and attractive grain patterns, but also for their subdued hues and steadfast texture—qualities that resonated with the literati’s pursuit of a reserved nature, endurance, and moral integrity. The natural attributes of materials are thus endowed with profound cultural semantics, and the process of creation begins with the recognition, respect and spiritual elevation of the “nature” of materials.

### 1.2. Modeling and production

The shaping of objects is a crucial process for transforming concepts into spatial forms, which contains unique structural rationality and aesthetic principles. The shaping of Chinese artifacts generally adheres to the principle of “valuing images in the making of objects”, but this “image” is not merely a simulation of the external form; it is also an abstract generalization of the cosmic order, the structure of life, and the functional ethics<sup>[4]</sup>. The inner circle and outer square shape of the jade cong is a miniature simulation of the cosmic model of “the sky is round and the earth is square”. The three-legged and two-ear shape of the bronze tripod, in the visual perception of stability and solemnity, embodies the power symbol of the ritual vessel. This emphasis on structural and symbolic proportions reached the peak of craftsmanship and philosophy in Ming-style furniture. Its shape completely discards the assistance of adhesives and iron nails, and purely relies on mortise and tenon structures to achieve a complex yet stable three-dimensional construction. The interlocking of each tenon and mortise is like the mutual generation of Yin and Yang, containing changes

within a rigorous logic. The elastic curves on the round-backed armchair are not merely decorations but are the result of precise calculations and the stress characteristics of natural wood. They not only provide comfort for the human body to lean on but also create lines with aesthetic tension in the space. In the field of ceramics, the pursuit of form points to another kind of artistic conception. The contour lines of the vessels in the Song Dynasty, whether it is the upright plum vase or the gentle and graceful jade vase, all pursue a natural and seamless smoothness without any trace of artificiality. The artisan uses the wheel to form the clay, allowing it to naturally grow and take shape during the rotation. The highest standard is “vitality and vigor”, making the static objects seem to contain an inner dynamic of life. Shaping thus becomes a creative practice that engages in dialogue with materials, coordination with functions, and resonance with the laws of the universe.

### 1.3. Pattern drawing

The patterns and colors on the surface of objects are the most direct and rich outward manifestations of cultural concepts. Decorative drawing is not a simple accessory but an indispensable part of creation. On the painted pottery of the Neolithic Age, simple patterns such as whirlpool patterns and fish patterns were not merely simple decorations; they were associated with people’s primitive worship<sup>[5]</sup>. By the Bronze Age, the grandeur and mystery of the Taotie pattern, with its symmetrical, abstract and tense form, reflected the visual construction of the early state regime towards the sacred and majestic. These patterns gradually became systematized and symbolized, forming a symbolic system that transcends materials and eras. For instance, the “Entwined Lotus” pattern, with its continuous branches and lush flowers and leaves, has become a symbol of the endless cycle of life and long-lasting blessings. The “meander pattern” is composed of continuous square folds, symbolizing eternal prosperity and a long history. The flowing and curling of the “cloud patterns” captures the natural charm and auspicious omens. The color system also carries a rigorous conceptual logic. The five colors of “blue, red, yellow, white and black” correspond to the Five Elements, five directions and five virtues, forming a color philosophy that explains the world. The imperial utensils

used in the court are often depicted in rich tones such as gold, yellow and red to show their grandeur. When scholars enjoy their leisure time, they prefer elegant and light colors such as green, white and ink to express their aspirations. The painting techniques of the patterns are also extremely ingenious. For instance, the blue and white water separation and color filling on porcelain, as well as the rhinoceros carving and filling on lacquerware, all reflect the technical standards of The Times. Moreover, the layout, which emphasizes the balance of density and sparseness and the interplay of reality and abstraction, is deeply influenced by the aesthetic principles of Chinese painting. Every line and every touch of color is an expression of traditional Chinese culture.

## 2. Form and System Level

In the long and continuous evolution of Chinese civilization, the formal and institutional level is a highly condensed manifestation of traditional Chinese culture. Formal institutions do not float above concepts but are embedded within society, transforming abstract value ethics into operational, sustainable and witness rituals, norms and systems.

### 2.1. Ritual System

The ritual system is undoubtedly the most core and magnificent creation at this level. It is a complete system that integrates faith, politics, ethics and social structure<sup>[6]</sup>. Through highly stylized rituals, artifacts and spatial sequences, concepts are materialized into participatory practices. For instance, the construction of capitals throughout history strictly adhered to the model of “left ancestral hall, right community, facing the back market” as recorded in the “Kao Gong Ji” of the “Rites of Zhou”. The layout of the Tang Dynasty’s Chang’an City, the Yuan Dynasty’s Dadu City, and even the Ming and Qing dynasties’ Beijing City all centered around the palace city, symmetrically unfolding a checkerboard pattern of streets, strictly distinguishing the palace area, sacrificial area, market, and wards, thus solidifying the empire’s cosmology and hierarchical order on the earth. In sacrificial ceremonies, the combination of utensils is the materialization of rituals. The Draft History of Qing records the ritual of worshipping heaven during

the Qianlong period. From the materials, shapes and display numbers of the cangbi and Huangcong to the GUI, fu and jue, there are strict regulations, meticulously interpreting the ancient principle that “vessels are used to store rituals”. Even the arrangement of a single inkstone or an incense burner in a scholar’s study is in line with the elegant customs of “left zither and right calligraphy” and “front burner and back screen”. Through the repeated practice of the body and objects, the ritual system internalizes external norms into the instinctive memory of the civilized body.

### 2.2. Clan System

The clan system that permeates the grassroots of society organizes and spatializes the ethical order. The ancient villages of Xidi and Hongcun in Huizhou are vivid specimens of the clan system in terms of their physical form. The entire village is centered around the main ancestral hall, “Love and Respect Hall” or “Renrang Hall”, with each branch ancestral hall located separately. The houses are built in clusters based on the closeness of blood ties, forming a distinct spatial spectrum. The ancestral hall itself, from the grade of the gate tower, the spaciousness of the hall to the solemnity of the bedchamber, its spatial sequence and decorative patterns (such as the wood carving of the “Hundred Sons Picture” symbolizing the continuous melon  $\square$ ) all reinforce the concept of respecting ancestors. Every spring and autumn, during the two ancestral ceremonies, all the members of the clan stand in the ancestral hall in the order of the ancestral hall. Under the chairmanship of the clan chief, the ceremony is completed, and the clan rules and family precepts are recited again at this time. Compiling dense family genealogies, such as the “Confucius Family Genealogy” and the “Shaoshan MAO Family Genealogy”, not only records the lineages but also contains the virtuous deeds of ancestors, land contracts, and family regulations and rewards and punishments, serving as the textual foundation for maintaining the identity and operation of the community. This system makes “family” a micro-model of “country”, and an individual’s identity and responsibility first obtain coordinates within the network defined by ancestral halls and genealogies.

### 2.3. Economic System

The fundamental institutions that maintain the operation of the traditional social economy regulate the pulse of material production. During the Tang Dynasty, the “rent, corvee and regulation” system was implemented. Among them, the “regulation” required farmers to pay physical goods such as silk and cloth, which directly stimulated the popularization of the home textile industry and the standardization of technology. The “craftsman registration system” implemented in the Ming Dynasty registered artisans under a special household and imposed hereditary corvee labor. Although it imposed personal constraints, it ensured the inheritance and meticulous production of high-end handicrafts such as Xuande furnaces and cloisonne needed by the imperial court and government. The “Thirteen Factories” foreign trade system established in Guangzhou during the Qing Dynasty monopolized foreign trade. The order demands of European merchants were conveyed to the porcelain workers in Jingdezhen and the painters in Guangzhou through traveling merchants, giving rise to “Guangcai” porcelain and export paintings that combined Chinese and Western patterns. Even custom-made tableware with family emblems appeared on the shapes of the vessels. One economic policy after another quietly guided the opening and closing of mines, the lighting and extinguishing of kilns, and the opening and closing of trade routes, eventually leaving deep imprints of The Times in the warp and weft of silk, the glaze of porcelain, and the square holes of copper coins.

The formal institutional level guides the development direction of social energy and creativity. The interweaving of various systems such as ritual, clan and economic systems has transformed the Chinese culture’s pursuit of order, inheritance and harmony into sustainable social practices. Make culture not only remain at the level of ideas and objects, but also become a living, operational and passed down from generation to generation way of life.

### 3. Core Spiritual Layer

The core spiritual aspect of China’s fine traditional culture constitutes the most profound and stable value foundation and thinking core of its civilization system<sup>[7]</sup>. This level transcends the physical forms and institutional

arrangements in specific time and space, embodying a pervasive cosmic cognition, ethical orientation, and life attitude, and constantly self-verifies, enriches, and transforms in the continuous historical practice. Its spiritual temperament is not an isolated and abstract philosophical proposition, but rather diffuses, permeates and is activated in various cultural creative activities, forming a highly recognizable world of meaning.

#### 3.1. Harmony between man and nature

The holistic thinking of “harmony between man and nature” and the cosmic sentiment are the meta-narratives of many cultural practices<sup>[8]</sup>. This concept does not merely refer to the harmonious coexistence of human beings and the natural environment, but rather represents a worldview that regards the order of human society, the rhythm of individual life, and the universal trend as an organic whole that is isomorphic and interpenetrating. In the I Ching, it is said, “Observe the celestial phenomena to observe the changes of time.” The expression “Observing human culture to transform the world” clearly reveals that the creation of human culture must be premised on an understanding of the way of heaven and earth. This spirit reaches its peak in classical garden-making art. In his work “Yuan Ye”, Ji Cheng of the Ming Dynasty proposed the principle that “though made by man, it seems to have been created by nature”. The design of the Suzhou Net Master Garden is a miniature cosmic model of this concept. The “Moon Arrives, Wind Comes Pavilion” in the garden is built along the water. Its existence is not only for viewing the scenery but also to echo the celestial phenomena - the pavilion, water and the moon form a series of exquisite dialogue relationships here, making the living space a node for perceiving the changing of the four seasons and the phases of the moon and the moon. In traditional agricultural practice, the 24 solar terms are by no means simple timeframes, but rather a comprehensive knowledge system and ritual framework that guide farming and regulate life. Folk customs such as planting willows during the Qingming Festival, picking tea during the Grain Rain Festival, and tasting new food at the Beginning of Autumn are all cultural behaviors that actively integrate people’s production and life into the rhythm of nature, reflecting a profound respect and ingenious adaptation to the favorable timing and

geographical conditions.

### 3.2. Harmony

The pursuit of “moderation” in traditional Chinese culture has shaped a unique aesthetic paradigm and value judgment. The idea of “Zhonghe” has a long history. The “Zhongyong” elevates “achieving Zhonghe” to the ontological height of “Heaven and earth take their place, and all things thrive”, symbolizing an ideal state where everyone finds their proper place and is full of vitality. This is not an unprincipled reconciliation, but rather grasping the appropriate “degree” in the dynamic process to achieve the balance and maximum efficiency of the system. In the art of calligraphy, Yan Zhenqing’s regular script of the Tang Dynasty is hailed as a model of “harmony and moderation”. His “Yan Qinli Stele” features powerful brushstrokes yet is full of backbone, a broad structure with a tight center, and a dense layout with smooth energy flow. It perfectly embodies the aesthetic qualities of “majestic but not fierce” and “dignified but not rigid”, and is precisely the visual embodiment of the Confucian gentleman’s personality. In the realm of traditional music, the guqin piece “Wild Geese Falling on the Flat Sand” depicts the natural image of white sand and wild geese landing in a light and distant tone through the fingering variations of “猱 chuo zhu”. Its musical mood is always controlled within the range of “sorrowful but not sorrowful, musical but not lecherous”, creating an ethereal and distant, peaceful state of mind. This is the ultimate expression of the “harmony” aesthetic in the auditory sense.

The ethical spirit of introversion and transcendence, along with the practical effort of “self-cultivation as the foundation”, lay the core foundation for personality development. Unlike some civilizations that entirely entrust their ultimate values to the afterlife, the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture emphasizes achieving the completeness and transcendence of life in the reality on this shore through inner moral cultivation and spiritual elevation<sup>[9]</sup>. The sequence of “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state and bringing peace to the world” in Confucianism clearly reveals the logic that “self-cultivation” is the foundation of all social ideals. This introverted trait has given rise to a highly developed culture of mind and nature as well as

the practice of self-cultivation. The “study room” culture that emerged since the Song Dynasty was a material manifestation of the scholar-officials’ construction of their personal spiritual space. A single inkstone, a lamp, several volumes of books and a painting not only form a place for study, but also serve as a cultivation ground for “examining myself three times a day” and “cultivating one’s temperament”. The choice of objects should be simple and elegant, with the intention of discarding external distractions and reflecting on one’s inner self. Zhu Xi’s verse, “Half an acre of square pond opens up with a mirror, and the light of the sky and the shadows of the clouds linger together,” not only describes the scenery but also symbolizes that through the continuous cultivation of “investigating things and exploring principles,” one can reach a state of inner clarity and clarity like a mirror. After Wang Yangming achieved enlightenment at Longchang, he advocated the unity of knowledge and action, and closely bound this introverted moral self-awareness with external ethical practice. He emphasized that true knowledge must be put into practice, and what cannot be done is not knowledge. He implemented the transcendent “heavenly principle” in the specific daily life of human relations.

### 3.3. Apply knowledge to practical use

The pragmatic rationality of “applying knowledge to practical use” ensures the vitality of civilization in responding to challenges<sup>[10]</sup>. Although Chinese culture attaches great importance to inheritance, it does not adhere rigidly to the past. It embodies the enterprising spirit of “If one can renew oneself every day, one will renew oneself every day, and renew oneself every day” as well as the philosophy of adaptation that “when in a difficult situation, one must change; when changed, one will find a way out; when one finds a way out, one will last long.” This spirit is reflected in a highly pragmatic attitude towards knowledge and technology. Jia Sixie of the Northern Wei Dynasty wrote “Qi Min Yao Shu”, systematically summarizing agricultural production techniques. The preface of the book clearly states: “It begins with the work of farming and concludes with the making of fermented sauces; no trade essential to the sustenance of life has been left unrecorded” This clearly reflects the purpose of writing to serve the well-being

of the people. The Dujiangyan Irrigation Project, which was presided over by Li Bing and his son, adheres to the design principles of “deep dredging of the shoal and low construction of the weir” and “seizing the opportunity to guide and adapting to The Times”. These principles are a model of engineering philosophy that aims to achieve the greatest benefits with the least intervention after a profound understanding of natural laws. For over two thousand years, they have continued to benefit future generations and shine with the immortal brilliance of practical rationality. Even in the field of philosophy that emphasizes profound thinking, in the early Qing Dynasty, Gu Yanwu and others, in response to the empty academic atmosphere of the late Ming Dynasty, vigorously advocated that “Confucian classics are Neo-Confucianism”, insisting that learning must “concern the governance and chaos of the state and the foundation of the people”, guiding academic research towards empirical verification and practical application, demonstrating a powerful driving force for self-renewal within culture.

The core spirit of traditional Chinese culture is a multi-level and interrelated dynamic value system. It acquires the basis and scale of existence from the cosmology of “harmony between man and nature”, establishes the criteria for value judgment and aesthetic creation with the thought of “moderation”, opens up the path of personality improvement through the practice of “self-cultivation” within, and ultimately implements the wisdom of “applying knowledge to the world” and “adapting to changes” in the practice of transforming the world<sup>[1]</sup>. These spiritual elements support each other and work together, endowing Chinese civilization with both profound historical determination and ethical warmth,

as well as flexibility and creativity in responding to The Times. They are like the deep codes of culture, not only shaping the artifacts, systems and artistic styles of the past, but also providing an indispensable spiritual spectrum and ideological resources for understanding the cultural psychology and innovative practices of contemporary China.

This article explains traditional Chinese culture through a three-layer structure, revealing its complete lineage from the concrete to the abstract and from practice to concept. The object layer, as the “skin” of culture, directly appeals to the senses but contains profound symbolic meanings. As the “skeleton” of culture, the institutional level transforms the value system into sustainable social norms and rituals. The spiritual layer, as the “soul” of culture, provides a stable core and innovative impetus for the continuation of civilization with core concepts such as “harmony between man and nature”, “moderation”, “self-cultivation”, and “practical application to the world”. This stratified analysis not only breaks through the limitations of a single perspective but also highlights the systematic and dynamic nature of Chinese culture - the spirit guides the system, the system shapes the objects, and the objects in turn solidify and disseminate the spirit. In the contemporary context, this framework helps to go beyond the superficial appropriation of traditional cultural symbols, deeply understand their internal logic and adaptability, and provide solid ideological resources for cultural innovation and inheritance. Ultimately, the article reminds us that the vitality of traditional culture precisely stems from the continuous dialogue and symbiosis among these objects, systems and spirits.

### Disclosure statement

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