

Study on the Plinth Art of Southeast Hubei Folk Dwellings

Taking Ancestral Temple Architecture as an Example*

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Abstract—Ancestral temple is the most distinctive folk architecture in Southeast Hubei and its plinths are not only the load-bearing construction, but also concentrated expression of its culture, art and science carrier. Based on the field investigation, this paper elaborates on plinth with Yangxin and Tongshan as the main research areas. From the aspects of the planar distribution, structure classification, modeling features, decorative patterns, carving techniques and other aspects of plinth in folk dwellings, it summarizes the artistic characteristics of plinth in the traditional architecture in Southern Hubei.

Keywords—*Southeast Hubei; folk dwellings; plinth*

I. INTRODUCTION

A plinth is a stone construction that is placed on the foundation and supports columns [1]. The main function is to distribute the concentrated load of the column body on the large underground area, and at the same time play the role of seismic and moisture-proof. The lower part of the plinth is buried under the stepped foundation or indoor ground, and the upper part of the exposed part can be made into a variety of carvings and decorations [2].

Plinth is not only an important load-bearing component of architecture, but also an art sketch to show the status of architecture. Ancestral temple architecture in Southeast Hubei is rich in types and quantity. It is not only the highest building in the folk dwellings, but also the center of the

spiritual world of village groups. The style of its plinth is even more diverse and rich, with great research value.

II. INTRODUCTION OF ANCESTRAL TEMPLE IN SOUTHEAST HUBEI

Southeast Hubei usually refers to the area south of the Yangtze river in the east of Hubei, including Huangshi, Daye, Yangxin, Tongshan, Chibi, Chongyang and other cities and counties, bordering Hunan, Jiangxi and Anhui [3]. It is located in the hilly area with abundant rain and moisture. The unique natural conditions gave birth to and nourished the traditional folk dwellings in Southeast Hubei. Among them the ancestral temple architecture Tongshan County and Yangxin County is particularly unique. The ancestral temples in these two places are of various types and quantities, which are all related to the historical reason of the two places as passageway of emigration.

Southeast Hubei was an early acceptance area for immigrants due to its close proximity to Jiangxi [4]. As an important migration channel in the great migration of "Filling Hunan and Hubei with Jiangxi people" and "Filling Sichuan with Hunan and Hubei people", Southeast Hubei bore and accepted people who left their homes and settled there. Ancestral temple building is the historical witness and living fossil of this event. In addition, due to the geographical features of Southeast Hubei — mainly mountainous and hilly areas and unique conditions of "being near the mountain and by the river", the village pattern with the ancestral temple as the center was able to maintain for a long time. The ancestral temple is not only the center of the public space in the village, but also the center of the spiritual world of the village. As the construction of the highest level of specifications and skills, the plinth in the ancestral temple building also has a variety of artistic forms and rich cultural connotation.

*Fund Project: Education Department of Hubei Province: Research on the inheritance of ancient ancestral halls and urban landscape innovation in southern Hubei (Project number: 201710927019); Education Department of Hubei Province: Research on architectural art of ancient ancestral halls in Southeast Hubei based on cultural soft power (Project number: 17Q172); Hubei University of Science and Technology: Research on architectural art and cultural inheritance of ancient ancestral halls in Southeast Hubei (Project number: 2016-18x010).

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLINTH IN ANCESTRAL TEMPLE

A. Location Characteristics

Ancestral temple is the symbol and glory of the clan, as well as the place to consolidate the blood relationship, strengthen the clan power and deal with the internal affairs of the clan [5]. It is the building of the highest specification in the village. No matter seen from its plane layout or internal space, it always shows a sense of strict order (as shown in "Fig. 1", "Fig. 2", "Fig. 3", and "Fig. 4"). Seen from its plane layout, the ancestral temple architecture shows the axis symmetry. A three-entry and three-bay courtyard is usually built up, with wing-room on both sides of the main hall [6]. An example is the Tan ancestral temple in Dafan town, Tongshan shown in "Fig. 1" and the Xu ancestral temple in Yangxin shown in "Fig. 2": Gate (front hall) — central hall (middle hall) — bedroom hall (back hall). The layout of the pillars is based on the axis of the ancestral temple, expanding symmetrically and with a strong sense of sequence. Among them, the pillars are particularly dense in the central bay, beside stage and the side porch of the patio.

In terms of the facade space, the height increased gradually from front hall to middle hall and to back hall. The facade space presents layout that is lower in front and higher behind. The spatial depth of these three functional spaces is not only a progressive relationship in time sequence, but also a progressive spatial order for clansmen to discuss matters or worship their ancestors in the ancestral hall. The tall and orderly columns and plinths with rich and diverse patterns create a solemn and orderly interior space that is progressive and ascending step by step.

B. (2) Structural Features

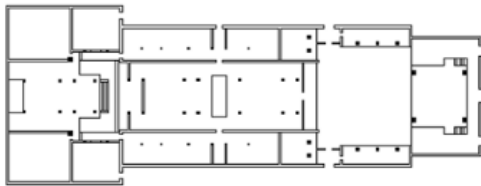


Fig. 1. Planar graph of the Tan ancestral temple in Tongshan.

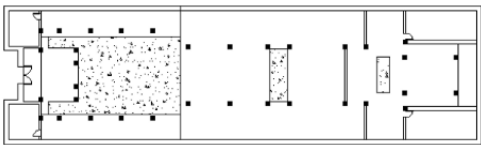


Fig. 2. Planar graph of the Xu ancestral temple in Yangxin.

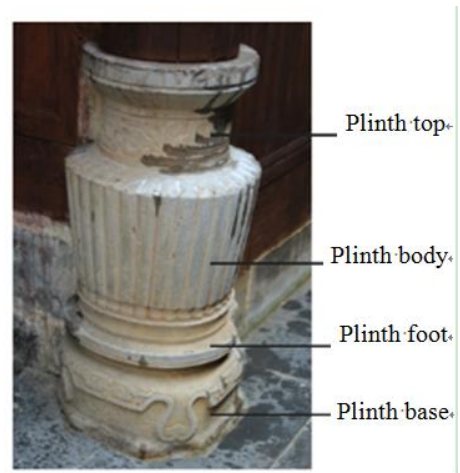


Fig. 3. Plinth structure of the Jiao ancestral temple in Tongshan.

The structure of the plinth can be roughly divided into three parts: plinth top, plinth body and plinth base. Among them, the body includes the following parts: plinth waist, plinth abdomen and plinth foot. Some of the plinths have single structure, with only one part, like square plinth and cylindrical plinth. There are also categories of plinth base, plinth body and plinth top in the combined type with complex structures. The Jiao ancestral temple in Tongshan is an example. (As is shown in "Fig. 3")

C. Modeling Features

Mr. Chen Congzhou pointed out very early that, "due to the dampness of a low-lying land, the base part of the plinth is relatively high, with various styles" [7]. Especially in Southern Hubei area where it's hot and humid and ancestral temple are widely distributed, the modeling of the plinths is diversified. There are many discussions on the types of its modeling. After sorting out the ancestral temple plinths in Southern Hubei (mainly concentrated in Tongshan and Yangxin), the author roughly divide the modeling into three types: abstract form, concrete form and compound form.

Abstract form: cylinder, cube, hexagon, octahedron;
concrete form: tub-covering type, bucket-covering type, Treasured vase type, melon pillar type, palace lantern type;
compound form: composed by multiple patterns.

1) *Abstract form*: The geometric patterns are summarized into abstract forms, so as to form a contrast with the plinths from whose models originate from material object.

- **Cylinder** Cylindrical plinths have concise model and the flat and simple surface is most common. An example is the Temple of the Revered Yu in Tongshan, where there are 8 cylindrical plinths with flat and simple surface from the front hall to the back hall (see "Fig. 4").
- **Cube** The cube-styled plinth is one of the simplest shapes. There are squares and rectangles with the same thickness from top to bottom. The four facets are generally decorated with patterns and engravings.

There are also some processed tube-typed plinths, For example, the four vertical edges are rounded by slight manipulation and turn into circular shape; or some other patterns can be added to the basic shape of the cube, without changing the basic model as cube.

- Polyhedron plinths usually refer to hexahedron or octahedron types. Such types are often seen in the front hall or beside the wing-rooms on both sides. The upper part of the plinth is square with six or eight sides, which are usually decorated with carved patterns on each side, such as the eight immortals of Taoism and eight Buddhist symbols of the power. The lower part is often represented as cube or round legs.

2) *Concrete forms*: People in Southern Hubei take the utensils and objects in daily life as the prototype, and carve the plinths in a similar shape, making the shapes enriched, which is full of interest. This kind is classified into concrete forms.

a) *Bucket-covering type*: One of the earliest forms of plinth, which can be traced back to the Western Han dynasty. The upper and lower bases of the plinth of bucket-covering type are squares with different sizes, and the shape of the upper sides is four isosceles trapezoids. It is called bucket-covering type since its shape is exactly like a bucket with the mouth facing down. The bucket-covering type is small in the top and large in the bottom, which can increase the load distribution of the plinth.

b) *Tub-covering type*: As the name suggests, it has the shape of an upside-down basin. It originated later than the bucket-covering type. The plinth is composed of two parts. The bottom is a square base and the upper part is a disc-shaped uplift. The difference between the tub-covering type and the bucket-covering type is that the former is square while the latter is round. There are two kinds in the tub-covering type: one is the plain tub without decoration, and the other is the tub decorated with various patterns. The plinths in the middle hall of the Tan ancestral temple in Baini Town, Tongshan are the typical typical representative of lotus pattern and tub-covering type.

c) *Melon-shaped type*: As the name suggests, this type imitates melons, in which the image of bumpkin is most commonly seen, Plinths shaped as melon are widely used in folk dwellings. They are popular among people for its extremely interesting shape related to farmers and the pumpkin symbolizing fertility, implying thriving multiplication of offspring and a good harvest (see "Fig. 6").

d) *Drum style*: Its shape comes from the instrument drum, close to the shape of cylindrical plinths. Drum can hearten people and have the symbol of victory, joy, warding off evil spirits. The round drum is a kind of musical instrument that people use to celebrate, and it is also the instrument that the army used to give orders in the battlefield in ancient times. This type is simple and natural for its plain surface without ornamentation. Also, it's decorated with alignment pattern on the upper and lower

edges which can also be bas-relief or high relief or hollow engraving. In South Hubei the plinths mostly have plain surface or are decorated with bas-relief, which is totally an intimation of drum.

e) *Palace lantern type*: Although the palace lantern type belongs to the hexahedron type, it is more complex. The upper and lower sections are not parallel, and have decorative patterns, different from a typical hexahedron type plinth.

f) *Treasured vase type*: This kind of plinth dates back to the Song dynasty. Its shape originates from the shapes of bottles and cans in daily life, and it is popular because of its auspicious meaning of "safeness and peace" (see "Fig. 7"). It is characterized by a neck that is slightly thinner than the neck of a column, and is usually carved around the bottle's belly. Treasured vase style plinths, high or low, elegant or very interesting, are extremely aesthetic. Such plinth with complex shape is of higher specification, which is mostly seen in funerary temples or stage.

3) *Combined type*: The plinths of combined type are mostly in the form of round top and square bottom, which reflects the Chinese idea of orbicular sky and rectangular earth." [8] This type has complex shapes. Several different styling elements are combined to compose a new plinth style. Generally, it can be divided into several levels from top to bottom. The combination of different elements makes it rich in form. Some are composed of multiple geometric shapes, and others are the combination of geometric shapes and utensils shapes, among which the most common type is the combination of lotus shape and tub-covering shape.

The plinths with complex style usually appear in the memorial temples of the highest specification — ancestral temple. And the treasured vase complex type is the most common in the combined type, like the Jiao ancestral temple in the Bajiaowan village in Tongshan shown in "Fig. 7".



Fig. 4. Cylindrical plinth (the Temple of the Revered Yu).



Fig. 5. Tub-covering type plinth (the Tan ancestral temple).



Fig. 6. Melon-shaped plinth (the Liu ancestral temple).



Fig. 7. Treasured vase type plinth (the Jiao ancestral temple).

IV. THE VALUE OF PLINTH IN ANCESTRAL TEMPLE

A. Scientific Value

Among the traditional forms of wooden dwellings, beam and pillar bearing is the biggest feature, and the appearance of plinth is undoubtedly a bright spot. Due to the geography and climate of Southeast Hubei, it's humid with abundant rain there. The plinths in ancestral temple are tall and heavy with large volume, and are often made by stone, having a very good bearing and the moisture-proof function.

B. Cultural Value

Ancestral temple architecture in different regions shows different local folk customs and reflects the multi-faceted cultural value of the local. People living in South Hubei known as "the tail of Wu and the head of Chu (the link of the areas of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and the Hunan, Hubei area today) had been in turbulent migration for a long time, thus were especially eager for stable farming life. People turned their hope and faith for a better life to symbols and patterns and engraved them in the architecture.

1) *Farming culture*: Fishing, collecting firewood, farming and reading are the four types of Business, representing the basic lifestyle of the working people of the Han nationality [9]. For thousands of years in China's traditional agrarian society, land was essential for survival. People turn their worship and fear to nature to images and place them in their dwelling space. The love for fishing, collecting firewood, farming and reading of the ancient people originates only from people' yearn for the unbridled and peaceful state of life of rusticity, but also from the psychological tendency of glorifying and illuminating their ancestors.

2) *Jingchu culture*: The concept of "phoenix flying and dragon dancing" of Chu people, as a kind of spirit, is also strongly reflected in the residential buildings [9]. Dragon and phoenix are common decorative patterns in Southern Hubei. The basic spirit of this kind of folk residence culture is: people-oriented humanism, self-improvement, open-minded and optimistic psychology, the way of thinking of images abstracting from viewing and the overall intuition.

C. Artistic Value

1) *Graphic pattern*: The artistic value of plinth lies not only in its various modeling forms, but also in its rich graphic patterns and harmonious and delicate details. These decorative patterns come from a variety of sources. Through the patterns, the collision of various local ideas and fashions can be seen to some extent [7].

Geometric pattern: most common on plinth of combined type and horizontal cube-styled plinth. Such as tortoiseshell pattern, ru-yi pattern, "卍" pattern, raised grain, huizi pattern, guaizilong pattern, etc.; the commonly seen utensil shapes are vase, copper coin and religious patterns like the eight Buddhist symbols of the power and eight immortals of Taoism; flower: lotus is a kind of flower that is mostly seen in plinth sample. These can be used both as the shape of

plinth and engraved patterns. The combination of the two is fabulous and unique. Other flowers and plants are peony, plum, bamboo, etc. Animals: such as dragon, lion, deer, monkey, elephant, crane and horse are common elements, birds, magpies, bats, fish and worms, birds and animals are common subjects. The combinations of fish and insect, flower and bird are especially common. As for figures, the characters and stories are mainly from folk tales and historical stories. "Fishing, collecting firewood, farming and reading", "the eight immortals association" as well as stories of the characters in the Three Kingdoms are all common patterns in folk dwellings in Southern Hubei. And the real life scene of farming is also the plain expression of working people to a better life.

2) *Carving technology*: The "Rules of Architecture" of Northern Song Dynasty summarized the techniques of carving of previous dynasties. "There are four methods of engraving: the first is to leave the carving motif protruding from the stone surface to a large degree to make significant ups and downs and multiple gradations, similar to a high relief or semicircle relief; the second is to cut down diagonally the part around the pattern, which remains no higher than the surface; the third is to cut down a layer of the surface evenly except the pattern; and the fourth is to flat and smooth the surface." All the four methods belong to the category of relief.

According to the depth of engraving, relief can be divided into: flat and smooth relief, thin relief, bas-relief and deep relief. The first type refers to grinding the stone surface smooth without engraving patterns. This kind of method can often be seen in plinth of geometric type. An example is the cylindrical plinth in the temple of the Revered Yu shown in "Fig. 4". Thin relief can be made by striping the background away from the pattern very lightly and it gives a sense of very thin space. Bas-relief is characterized by obvious contour and prominent decorative pattern. (see "Fig. 5") Deep relief is multi-depth high embossing of the object, more like making a sculpture. With the pursuit of image fidelity and integrity, this method requires the underside of the pattern to be slightly processed, instead of making simple "flat" effect. (see "Fig. 7")

V. CONCLUSION

Plinth was designed to meet the practical function of the building itself at the beginning. Later, with the reformation of technology, continuous innovation and development, it has been given a deeper cultural value and connotation.

A. *Characteristics of the Times*

As in other areas, ancestral temples in Southern Hubei developed rapidly in the Qing Dynasty due to the government's encouraging policies. The existing ancestral temples in Southern Hubei were mostly built in Middle to Late Qing Dynasty. As the ancestral temple architecture, the core spiritual place for commemorating ancestors and "founding the country and bringing it peace", the plinth has also been endowed with the time characteristics of its inner space spirit.

B. *Characteristics of Material*

The stone drawn locally were of low quality, so after passing long-term fumble and loss, a layer of "cladding" is formed on the surface, making the plinth polished swarthy.

C. *Characteristics of the Craft*

Since the stones were collected locally and it was damp and cold, the carving crafts used were mainly bas-relief, which is economic for requiring less labor yet remaining the texture. Generally speaking, the quality is poor and the types are relatively abundant. It is also an embodiment of the pursuit of multiculturalism.

The gene of culture will not disappear because of the passage of time and the change of dynasties. The historic reason of being a migration corridor and the enclosed environment make the uniqueness of the ancestral temple architecture in Southern Hubei — it features Jiangxi style and has relative stable inner development. At the same time, the "emotion", "meaning", "interest" and "spirit" in architectural decoration technology are expressed vividly, making plinths better in harmony with other buildings and thus making the whole building more beautiful and magnificent.

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