

# A Comparative Study on Architectural Cultures of Bai Nationality and Han Nationality

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**Key Words:** Traditional Residential Architecture; Bai Nationality; Architectural culture of Han Nationality; Western Architectural Elements.

**Abstract.** Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province is the main gathering place for Bai nationality, and also the important birthplace of Bai culture. Bai's traditional residential architecture is an important part of Bai culture. Taking Dali Bai's traditional residential architecture as the main research object, the article studies its comparison with architectural culture of Han nationality, and analyzes some western elements embodied in Bai's residential architecture.

## 1. Introduction

Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, located in the southwest border area of China, is a famous historical and cultural city and one of the first excellent tourist cities in China. Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture is the gathering place of Bai nationality and the birthplace of Bai culture. In the process of social development, the traditional dwellings of Bai nationality have embodied distinct regional, national and historical heritability. In the exchanges with various ethnic groups, the traditional dwellings of Bai ethnic group show great inclusiveness. This article intends to compare the architectural cultures in traditional residential buildings of Bai nationality and Han nationality, as well as some western elements embodied in Bai residential architecture.

## 2. Historical Overview of Dali Region

During the Qin Dynasty (221 BC-207 BC), the first emperor of Qin (259 BC-210 BC) established counties in Yunnan area and built the "Five-foot Road", which strengthened the trade between Yunnan region and the Central Plains. During the reign of Emperor Wudi of Han Dynasty (202 BC-220), "Shu-Yuandu Road" ("Shu" refers to "today's Sichuan province in China"; "Yuandu" refers to today's India), later known as "the Southern Silk Road", was built, which made the economic and cultural exchanges between Yunnan and the Central Plains more frequent. In Tang Dynasty (618-907), the cultural exchanges between the kingdom of *Nanzhao* (738-902) (today's Dali region) and the Central Plains reached the peak with the separation and combination of the state of *Nanzhao* and the central regime of the Tang Dynasty. In the exchanges between Bai nationality and Han nationality in Central Plains, the advanced cultures and technologies, including architectural culture and technology, was accepted by the ancestors of Bai people. In the following historical process, Bai ancestors gradually integrated the Han-style courtyard dwelling culture into their own national architectural culture, forming a typical Bai residential dwelling form, like *Sanfang Yizhaobi*<sup>i</sup>, *Sihe Wutianjing*<sup>ii</sup>, *Liuhe Tongchun*<sup>iii</sup>.

## 3. A Comparison of traditional residential dwellings of Bai nationality in Dali and Siheyuan (Han-style quadrangle) in Beijing

Beijing *Siheyuan* is the most representative form of Han-style courtyard architecture. The so-called courtyard is a courtyard with houses in its four sides and a courtyard in the center. The courtyard

runs through the central axis. The north room, sitting in the north side and facing south, is the main room; the rooms in the east and west sides are called wing rooms; the south room with its door opening to the north is known as *Daozuo* room (inverted room or gatehouse). The traditional residential dwelling buildings of Bai nationality in Dali are the product of the integration of the Central Plains courtyard architectural culture and local culture. On the one hand, it inherits the ritual idea of “the righteous and the honorable are centered” in Han-style courtyard in the Central Plains; on the other hand, it pays attention to the integration with the natural environment and makes more reasonable improvements in lighting, layout and decoration.

The differences between Bai’s traditional residential dwellings and Beijing *Siheyuan* are as follows:

### 3.1 direction of main building

In the traditional residences of Bai nationality in Dali, the main buildings generally sit west and face east, which is closely related to Dali’s unique geographical environment. Dali lies on Cangshan Mountain in the west and Erhai Lake in the east, and the wind direction is mostly southwest or westerly. Therefore, the residents of the Bai nationality in Dali design the main house to sit west and face east when they build the house, so as to avoid the strong wind blowing in. In addition, the Bai people have a proverb: "Only when there are mountains on the right side can people afford a family." It means that behind the main axis of the courtyard, there must be a hillside with auspicious geomantic omen, which is conducive to a better life. Therefore, the main house sitting west to east is the Bai people's dual choice of nature and culture.

Most of the main houses in Beijing *Siheyuan* are sitting in the north and facing the south. One reason is the natural environment. China is located in the northern hemisphere. The rooms facing south are more abundant in sunshine in a day than those facing other directions. This is conducive to lighting and physical and mental health. In addition, most areas of China have northerly winds in winter and southeasterly winds in summer, and houses facing south are also better to shelter from the wind. Secondly, it is due to historical and traditional culture. Ancient emperors sat north and faced south when they met ministers, which is said to be related to *Wuxing Bagua* (Five Elements and Eight Diagrams). In ancient times, when Kings ascended the throne, they would sit north and face south. They were called "king of the south". The *Ligua* in the *Bagua* (Eight Diagrams), known as the Southern Diagram, symbolizes light. Facing south, the emperor received ministers and handled government affairs, symbolizing facing the light and governing the world. In contrast, the "north" has a negative meaning in Chinese traditional culture (In Chinese, “*bai* (be defeated)” sounds similar to “*bei* (north)”). The Chinese ancients lost the battle and were called “*baibei*(be defeated in the north)”. Therefore, in traditional Chinese culture, the position of sitting north and facing south is known as the supreme position, which is clearly reflected in the architectural connotation of Beijing quadrangle.

### 3.2 gate

The gate of traditional residence of Bai nationality in Dali usually is in the northeast corner. “According to the saying “*Qinglong* (green dragon) on the left and *Baihu* (white tiger) on the right” in *Fengshui* in Chinese culture, the gate opens on the left side of the front of the residence of Bai people. That is the auspicious *Qinglong* side. (按风水的‘左青龙，右白虎’之说，白族大门开在住宅的前左方，即吉祥的青龙一方。)” (Wang, P31)

The gate of Beijing *Siheyuan* is usually located in the southeast corner, and the gate is not opposite to the main house. According to the theory of *fengshui* (geomantic omen) in China and the fact that the main house of Beijing quadrangle is sitting in the north and facing the south, and the gate in the southeast corner is conducive to family safety and smoothness, as well as to wide financial resources. In addition, the terrain of Beijing is high in the northwest and low in the southeast, and the drainage system of Beijing quadrangle generally passes through the gate. Therefore, the gate in the southeast corner is also due to the terrain environment.

### 3.3 layout

The buildings in the courtyard of Bai people are usually two-story buildings, which are connected to each other. “The corridor style is adopted in each house. The lower floor recedes to the depth of a corridor, which enlarges the upper space of the courtyard and increases the sense of stretching. As a result, there is a gap between the roofs of the two buildings, and a semi-octagonal firewall (also known as the sparrow platform) is built here to prevent the wind from blowing in. (各房采用厦廊式, 楼层较低层后退一廊子的深度, 扩大了院子上部空间, 增加舒展感。因而带来了两房相连处楼层屋顶出现间隙, 在这里又修建一道半八边形封火墙(又称落雀台)挡风吹入。)” (Wang, P 36)

Beijing quadrangles are mostly one-story bungalows, and are not connected to each other. There is a side room on each side of the main room, which is called "*Mingsan Anwu*"<sup>iv</sup>; that is to say, it seems that there are three rooms, but in fact there are five rooms. There are two side rooms on each side of the main room respectively, which is called "*Mingwu Anqi*"<sup>v</sup>; that is to say, it seems that there are five rooms, but in fact there are seven rooms. “The front of the east and west side rooms and right opposite the north gable wall of east and west wing-rooms are all separated and blocked by courtyard walls and galleries, and just right form a pair of small yards before side rooms. Because the small courtyards are not paved by bricks and rocks, it is called an ‘open ground’, and often planted some flowers and trees which the house-owner likes.” (Zhan, p25)

## 4. Western elements in traditional residential dwellings of Bai nationality in Dali

Since 1840, China had been reduced to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. In the southwestern part of China, with the construction of Yunnan-Vietnam Railway, the "westernized" architecture characterized by French architecture had entered the local culture of Yunnan in the form of colonial architecture. During the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), the flourishing development of Xizhou Business Group made businessmen not only set up branches at home, but also set up branches abroad. More people went abroad, even lived abroad, and were influenced more or less by foreign culture, which was reflected in the houses they built when they returned home.

### 4.1 gate

The traditional residential buildings of Bai nationality in Dali are generally divided into *Yousha* gates (gates with eaves) and *Wusha* gates (gates without eaves). Compared with *Yousha* gates, *Wusha* gates reflect more western architectural culture. *Wusha* gate embodies the concept of sculpture aesthetics and geometry aesthetics in western architecture, and has strong composition elements and strong geometry composition in modern European architecture. The arch structure in the western gate plays a very good role in load-bearing. In addition, the pillar structure on both sides of *Wusha* gate also reflects the western architectural culture.

### 4.2 window

On the basis of traditional windows, the upper part of the windows of Bai residential architecture is also integrated with some western elements, such as circular arch, pointed arch, etc. ; but the main part of the window is still of the traditional Chinese style, which reflects the integration of Chinese and Western architectural culture.

In the long process of historical evolution, on the basis of integrating different architectural cultures and combining with the local natural environment, Dali Bai's traditional residential buildings have formed its unique ethnic characteristics in architecture, fully reflecting the architectural level of Bai residential buildings, leaving valuable architectural culture for Bai people and the whole Chinese nation.

## Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by the Scientific Research Foundation Project of Yunnan

Education Department (2015Y426)).

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<sup>i</sup> Sanfang Yizhaobi, a typical residential architectural form in Bai nationality, means a quadrangle with three two-story buildings in three sides and a screen wall facing the main building.

<sup>ii</sup> Sihe Wutianjing, a typical residential architectural form in Bai nationality, means a quadrangle with four two-story buildings in each side and five yards (four small yards in the corners and a big one in the middle)

<sup>iii</sup> Liuhe Tongchun, a typical residential architectural form in Bai nationality, also known as Zouma zhuanjiaolou, means two quadrangles are linked together, with corridors connecting each buildings both upstairs and downstairs.

<sup>iv</sup> Mingsan Anwu, a typical architectural form in Han-style courtyard, means that it seems that there are three rooms in the main building, but actually there are five rooms. The main room is of three standard rooms in area in traditional house-building in Han nationality.

<sup>v</sup> Mingwu Anqi, a typical architectural form in Han-style courtyard, means that it seems that there are five rooms in the main building, but actually there are seven rooms. The main room is of three standard rooms in area in traditional house-building in Han nationality.